Recognizing Encounters with Ultimacy across Religious Boundaries

Jeffery D. Long*

Encountering the Ultimate in the *Bhagavad Gītā*: An Experience of *Pratyabhijñā* (Recognition)

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Abstract: Is religious experience necessarily the product of one specific tradition? The constructivist approach to religious experience which prevails in the contemporary academy certainly suggests that this is the case. But is this not at odds with the idea of an ultimate reality that exists objectively and independently of what any given group of human beings may think about it? This paper argues that the phenomenon of religious conversion militates against the constructivist account.

Keywords: Hinduism; religious experience; constructivism; William Alston; John Hick; Alfred North Whitehead; Kashmiri Śaivism; Bhagavad Gītā; Vaiṣṇavism; Vedānta

1 Introduction

Is religious experience necessarily the product of one specific tradition? The constructivist approach to religious experience which prevails in the contemporary academy certainly suggests that this is the case. But is this not at odds with the idea of an ultimate reality that exists objectively and independently of what any given group of human beings may think about it? For constructivist thinkers who are not religiously committed to belief in a sacred reality or realities, this tension is not seen as a weakness of constructivism. It may even be seen as a strength, with constructivism being offered specifically as an alternative to phenomenological accounts of religious experience—those found in the works of earlier scholars, like Mircea Eliade and Ninian Smart—that would seem to operate from such a belief.

This paper will argue that the phenomenon of religious conversion, though it certainly does not *disprove* constructivism, does militate against the constructivist account, particularly when it involves ‘surprises,’ such as new beliefs or new interpretations of established doctrines, rather than simply replicating the worldview of a tradition from whose practice it emerges. If, in other words, religious experiences emerge more or less straightforwardly from certain practices established by religious traditions precisely to produce these experiences, it would seem that these experiences ought, consistently, to sustain the practitioners’ commitments to their traditions. Thus, the faith of a Christian can be expected to increase if she has a mystical experience of the Virgin Mary as a result of consistent recitation of the Rosary. Or the commitment of a Theravāda Buddhist can be expected similarly to increase if he attains particular states of consciousness described in the Pāli canon through observing the meditative practices said to lead to these states. But how does one account for experiences that involve a break with tradition, such as, for example, St. Paul’s vision of Christ on the road to Damascus? Surely Paul’s (at that time Saul’s) vision did not emerge from Hellenistic Jewish doxastic practices.

*Corresponding author: Jeffery D. Long, Elizabethtown College, United States of America; E-mail: longjd@etown.edu

This article is part of a project in which authors have been asked to reflect upon experiences in which they take themselves to have encountered ultimate reality in the course of reading a text from another religious tradition. This is part of the larger project of developing a ‘theology without walls.’ This term, coined by Jerry Martin, refers to theological reflection that does not occur within the bounds of a particular religious tradition, but which takes the form of a thought experiment in which texts and experiences drawn from all (or at least many) traditions are seen as forming data for reflection upon the nature of ultimate reality. Theology without walls thus takes the existence of an ultimate reality to be axiomatic, and can thus see at least *purely* constructivist approaches—or what might also be called *reductionist* approaches—to religious experience to be of only limited value.

This particular set of reflections is necessarily autobiographical in nature, its object being an experience had by the author and viewed by the author as an encounter with ultimate reality as mediated by a sacred text. It will seek, though, to connect this experience with the wider questions and concerns pursued by theologians and philosophers of religion from many traditions, bringing the experience and the work of these other thinkers into a dialectical exchange. Specifically, it will draw upon and engage with the thought of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, Utpaladeva, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Alfred North Whitehead, John Hick, and William Alston, as well as with the *Bhagavad Gītā* itself and the wider Vaiṣṇava textual tradition in which the *Gītā* is situated. The multi-traditional nature of the theological resources on which these reflections draw—thinkers and texts from Kashmir Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, Advaita Vedānta, Christianity, and process thought—is part of what makes this project an example of a theology without walls.

The specific experience upon which I shall reflect is my encounter, at the age of fourteen, with the *Bhagavad Gītā* at a flea market in the parking lot of the Methodist Church in my small Missouri hometown. Though I now identify religiously as Hindu—so the *Gītā* is no longer, for me, ‘a text from another religious tradition’—this was not the case when I was fourteen. Indeed, this particular encounter played a large role in my subsequent spiritual path and my becoming Hindu: specifically, an adherent of the Vedānta tradition of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

At least part of the larger theological significance that I shall draw from this experience is thus in regard to the question of how encounters with ultimacy through the medium of a text from another tradition can lead to religious transformation, including even a change of religious identity.

Although I shall be using the term ‘conversion,’ I should note that the tradition I inhabit is not generally comfortable with this term. In the words of Dr. Uma Mysorekar:

Hindus don't believe in conversions...We never convert anyone to Hinduism. But it is an individual's choice. If they choose to follow Hinduism, then they are most welcome...Conversion is based on solicitation. We don't go and tell people, ‘Look, your religion is no good. But my religion is better, so come and follow Hinduism.’ No, that is not acceptable.¹

The late Swami Dayananda Saraswati elaborates further:

Religious conversion *by missionary activity* remains an act of violence. It is an act of violence because it hurts deeply, not only the other members of the family of the converted, but the entire community that comes to know of it. One is connected to various persons in one's world. The religious person in every individual is the innermost, inasmuch as he or she is connected to a force beyond the empirical. The religious person is connected only to the force beyond he has now accepted. That is the reason why the hurt caused by religion can turn into violence. That is why a religious belief can motivate a missionary to be a martyr. When the hurt of the religious becomes acute, it explodes into violence. Conversion is violence. It generates violence.²

Hindu objections to conversion, which these two quotations illustrate well, are not so much to a person taking up another religious tradition (although concerns are expressed about the disruption this can cause in families and communities), but to attempts to persuade or *coerce* others to change their religious identity.

¹ <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/vtx5qc/the-colbert-report-barack-obama-s-church-search---dr-uma-mysorekar>, accessed 10 June 2018.

² Dayananda Saraswati, “Conversion is an Act of Violence”, emphasis mine.

In keeping with this sensibility, when I use the term conversion, I am referring, specifically, to the process by which a person decides for herself to make a transition from one religious identity to another, and not to any attempt to bring about such a transition in another human being: that is, to *proselytization*. I thus differentiate conversion (which, in my usage, is an entirely voluntary act) from proselytization (which can often be coercive and destructive).

I shall suggest that the reality of conversion points to the inadequacy of ideas of religious experiences as necessarily tradition-bound: that is, as the products or epiphenomena of established religious traditions. For how did religious traditions come to exist in the first place? If there is no wider, trans-religious reality that human beings are capable of encountering, how is it that change occurs in the history of religions? Why do religions not simply replicate themselves, *ad infinitum*? How do we account for a Buddha (who had no guru, but was self-enlightened), a Paul (as already mentioned), or a Prophet Muhammad?

To be sure, it is not necessary that one posit an ultimate reality to account for such change. The trans-religious reality might be a reality of human biology, or of historical contingency. My point is that a constructivist account of religious experience that reifies religious traditions as the *sole* source of religious experience and sets aside the possibility that traditions mediate something other than themselves to human consciousness fails to account for: (1) changes across time internal to traditions, (2) experiences such as conversion from one tradition to another, and (3) experiences that lead to the emergence of entirely new traditions. A force other than the religions themselves is needed to explain these phenomena, unless one wishes to embrace a Hegelian determinism, in which such experiences arise due to structural instabilities or contradictions internal to traditions. This is not an unreasonable route to take, though it is important to point out that Hegel also viewed change through time as the gradual manifestation of a greater absolute reality, or world-spirit.

2 The epistemic question: Getting to the Ultimate beyond the walls of tradition

If one is going to affirm that one has encountered ultimate reality through the medium of a sacred text—or, for that matter, through any medium—the first question to arise for many is how one might know this to be the case. If there is an ultimate reality that manifests to human beings in the experience of reading a text, how does one know if this is actually happening in a given case?

This will, of course, depend upon one's conception of ultimate reality, and this conception is something that will inevitably have been provided by one's cultural and religious conditioning. This is the starting point of constructivist approaches to religious experience, and it is not incorrect. The problems mentioned earlier arise only if it is also taken to be the end point of the conversation.

In short, one receives a concept, or concepts, of ultimate reality from the environment into which one is acculturated. To put it most simply, a Christian, Muslim, or Jew will likely conceive of ultimate reality as a personal deity who is also the creator of the universe and the highest arbiter of morality. A Buddhist or Daoist will likely conceive of ultimate reality as the dynamic interplay of phenomena from one moment to the next. And a Hindu will likely conceive of ultimate reality as both personal and impersonal, and transcendent of both categories: as a supreme person, or as an infinite being, consciousness, and bliss beyond time and space.

In his groundbreaking study, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, William Alston argues that religious experience is a valid source of knowledge and that Christians are justified in their belief in God by their attested experiences of having perceived God. How is this the case? How can one know that a Christian's experience of God is not delusory? Alston's response to this question takes the form of his account of what he calls *doxastic*, or belief-forming, practices. Doxastic practices are socially constructed and accepted ways of forming and evaluating beliefs.³ These practices are not confined to the realm of religion, but also encompass the entire range of ways in which human beings cultivate knowledge,

³ Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, 100.

including sensory knowledge. All of our knowledge is mediated to us through language, culture, and so on, as given to us by society.

Alston's argument is not intended to be completely airtight. His argument is that if, on a pragmatic basis, we find the means of knowledge provided to us by our social environment to be, on the whole, reliable, then we are rationally justified in trusting those means of knowledge. Just as there are criteria given by the wider society for determining whether a sensory perception, for example, is valid, Christian traditions similarly provide the criteria for establishing whether a given experience is a genuine perception of God or a delusion. If one were to believe that God had told one to commit mass murder, for example, the contradictions between such an injunction and other things known about God through Christian teaching would count as evidence that one had not, in fact, perceived God at all, but that one might be mentally ill, or perhaps being deceived by another external force (and not God).

As Alston acknowledges, a difficulty with his position is that Christianity is not the only tradition that possesses doxastic practices and criteria for discerning whether one has really perceived ultimate reality or not. To his credit, Alston notes that the same argument he has made for Christian claims of perceiving God applies to the claims of other religious traditions as well. He even goes so far as to suggest that the pluralistic hypothesis of John Hick has much to recommend it in this regard.⁴ The reality is that a great many conceptions of ultimate reality exist, corresponding to the religious traditions of the world, and an equally great many sets of corresponding doxastic practices and criteria for determining when one has actually encountered ultimate reality and when one has not.

Alston is not a constructivist. He holds a realist conception of truth, and claims that, if one takes oneself to have *perceived* God, then one is justified in believing that God does, indeed, exist. But the dependence upon the doxastic practices and criteria of a particular tradition for discerning the validity of a putative encounter with ultimate reality that his approach involves does make it akin to constructivism inasmuch as it leaves one with the difficulty of determining how or whether one might encounter divinity *across the boundaries* of a religious tradition.

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines minimal or 'soft constructivism' as "the view that there is no mystical experience without at least some concepts, provided by one's cultural conditioning, concepts being what 'construct' an experience."⁵ This is different from the realist 'theory of appearing' which Alston employs. It is, in fact, closer to Hick's view, in which one never experiences ultimate reality—or, to use Hick's term, drawn from Vedānta, 'the Real'—as such. All our experiences of ultimate reality are actually, according to Hick's Kantian account, experiences of divine phenomena, the divine noumenon being the unexperienceable ground of all such phenomena. The Real itself, according to Hick, "cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive. None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the *unexperientable* ground of that realm."⁶ Hick's view is a 'soft' and not a 'hard' constructivism, though, because Hick claims that an actual ultimate reality does, indeed, finally underlie the many and varied perceptions of it that constitute the experiences to which the world's religious traditions attest. Hick, like Alston, believes that there is such a thing as a veridical experience of ultimate reality. His introduction of a Kantian distinction between ultimate reality as it is in itself—a divine noumenon—and ultimate reality as perceived variously by Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and so on—divine phenomena—enables him to affirm, pluralistically, that such varied experiences as Christian encounters with a loving God, Buddhist encounters with the interdependent and empty nature of all phenomena, and Hindu encounters with Viṣṇu, Śiva, Śakti, or Brahman beyond all qualities can all be valid experiences of ultimate reality. Ultimate reality, on Hick's account, lends itself to being experienced as all these varied phenomena. The particular way ultimate reality will be experienced by a given person will depend on how their experience is shaped—constructed—by the concepts available to them through their religious tradition, culture, and society: through, as Alston would say, their doxastic practices.

⁴ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*.

⁵ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Mysticism*.

⁶ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 246.

We are still left, though, with the question of discerning which putative experiences on the part of religious people are genuine encounters with ultimate reality and which are not. Hick has expanded our vision by affirming that ultimate reality can be approached through the conceptual matrices of many traditions, and not only one. This addresses the pluralistic concern of arbitrarily elevating one tradition over all others as providing the only reliable guide to ultimate reality solely on the basis of the fact that it is the tradition into which one has been acculturated. It also addresses the fact that—as Alston, again, affirms—all religious people are as justified as Christians in trusting the doxastic practices and criteria of their respective communities and traditions. But it also leaves us with the question of how a person wearing the ‘virtual reality headset’ provided by one tradition can perceive whether a person wearing a different ‘virtual reality headset’ truly is encountering ultimate reality.

One possibility is that one can apply the criteria of one’s own tradition to the experiences of others. This, however, inevitably involves distortion. A Christian might conclude, upon looking at the life and teaching of the Buddha and assessing it in light of the gospel that the Buddha really did perceive God and taught important truths to the people of his time and place. The Buddha did not, however, see *himself* as perceiving God in a Christian sense. To read him as having so done, despite his own testimony and the testimony of his community to the contrary, would seem to do violence to his own self-understanding, however well-intentioned and charitable this interpretation might appear to be. This is the kind of patronizing attitude to which those who object to the stance of religious *inclusivism* find problematic: the universalization of the criteria of one’s own tradition, which will necessarily lead to the conclusion that one’s own tradition holds the fullest conception of truth.

Another possibility—the one for which Hick opts—is to seek criteria that are shared across religious traditions. These criteria do, indeed, exist; for the world’s religions share a great many values and insights in common, especially in the realm of morality. Hick discerns in the world’s religions an affirmation of a moral transformation from an egocentric state to a ‘Reality-centered’ state. One who encounters the Real becomes more compassionate, seeing the Real in all beings.

This is certainly helpful. If one were to believe that one had encountered ultimate reality through the medium of the sacred text of another tradition, one support for this belief would be if one could point to ways in which this encounter had transformed one in positive ways recognizable to one’s religious community. But we have still not gotten entirely beyond the walls of tradition. What if one’s encounter led one to leave one’s religious community and join another? What if it led one to be convinced that one’s community was wrong about some important matter of doctrine and that another community’s account was more adequate? Or that a tradition-bound approach to ultimate reality is itself fundamentally mistaken, it being impossible for ultimate reality to be fully encompassed or contained within the confines of any particular set of ideas or practices?

It would seem that, *pace* constructivism, an even wider set of criteria is needed than those shared among religious traditions for determining whether an encounter with ultimate reality that occurs across religious boundaries is a valid one. We are otherwise forced to deny that encounters of this kind can occur. This is a paradoxical denial even for strong adherents of religious traditions to make; for many of these traditions themselves emerged from such putative encounters. Unless we are to affirm that every occasion of religious conversion is rooted in false consciousness—that ultimate reality only appears within the confines of specific traditions to their devout adherents—then we must allow for the possibility of encounters with ultimate reality that ‘break the rules’: that lead one to, for example, leave one’s native tradition for another, or start a new one altogether.

At the same time, keeping the minimum criterion that one’s encounter ought not lead one to violate fundamental moral principles affirmed across traditions—that we are not going to accept as encounters with ultimate reality experiences that lead those who have them to embark upon a crusade of violence and cruelty toward other living beings, to endorse racism or exploitation or genocide, and so on—also seems to be an essential desideratum for a theology without walls. There needs to be a discernment between those ‘rules’ which are dispensable—breaking which may reflect the transformative will or impulse of the ultimate reality—and those which are binding upon all. It is essential to ask whether one’s encounter with the ultimate transforms one in morally positive ways or morally negative ones, even as it leads one to challenge other dimensions of tradition.

3 The encounter

As I mentioned at the start of this essay, the main object of my reflections here will be a life-changing encounter with a sacred text that occurred in the parking lot of the Methodist Church in my hometown of Montgomery City, Missouri. This event happened when I was fourteen years of age. I have narrated this experience numerous times, and have written about it more than once.⁷

Was this experience an encounter with ultimate reality? It was not tied in any obvious way to either Christian or Hindu doxastic practices. Did it transform my life in positive ways which might be recognizable as such across religious boundaries? This, the reader will need to judge.

3.1 Prelude to the encounter

In February of 1980, less than a month before my eleventh birthday, my father suffered in a serious accident which left him quadriplegic. This was an incredibly trying time for my family. My father's physical suffering was profound; but even greater than that was his mental, emotional, and spiritual anguish, as he mourned the loss of all the activities that had given him joy in life. He had been a gifted musician and woodworker who could no longer pursue either of these activities. For that matter, he could no longer even brush his own teeth, scratch his nose if it itched, or roll over in bed without assistance. As a Vietnam War veteran, he had access to facilities from the VA which allowed him a certain measure of mobility. This included an electric wheelchair, which he was able to control with a small lever that he could move with his mouth. After several months of hospitalization and rehabilitation, he came home, where he was given care by my mother, with some assistance from me as well. His ability to move about our house, and eventually, outside and around our small Missouri town, seemed to cheer him and improve his spirits. But he was, in fact, merely concealing the depth of his depression. On a summer evening in June of 1981, he put his wheelchair in the path of an oncoming train, taking his own life.

To say that this entire series of events, the period of roughly one and a half years from my father's injury to his very public suicide, was devastating would be an understatement, to say the least. For me it created, among other things, an urgent need for answers: for a narrative that would make sense not only of my father's suffering, but of all suffering—that would account for why it is that we live in a world where such things occur.

I was, from an early age, a person of faith, raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, and quite devout. The idea that the universe might simply be a cruel and random place, indifferent to all our suffering certainly crossed my mind during this period. I finally rejected this view, though, as, in the words of a thinker whose work I would read years later, “bad news for the many.”⁸

In other words, in a universe which is, to use John Hick's term, “religiously ambiguous,”⁹ in which there are strong cases to be made both for and against a position of religious faith, one is justified in adopting a narrative that, so long as it does not clash with our best established scientific knowledge, enables one to sustain one's hope for some good final outcome to existence, and to continue living from day to day. This was rather an urgent thought process for me in the months after my father's death, when I gave serious thought to whether I ought to follow him in taking my own life to be free from a world of cruelty and sorrow.

Of course, simply wishing something to be the case does not make it so. What if life just is terribly unfair? It may well be “that the universe owes us no solace and hence guarantees us no afterlife.”¹⁰ As I

⁷ In greatest detail in an essay titled “‘Never Was There a Time...’ Crossing Over to Hinduism through the *Bhagavad Gita*” (published in Rose, *Border-Crossings: Stories of Interfaith Encounter*, but also in the August 2015 issue of *Sutra Journal* (“The Gita: A Healing Revelation”), as well as in the autobiographical introduction to my first book, *A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism*, 1-22).

⁸ Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*, 19-24.

⁹ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 227-228.

¹⁰ Anonymous personal communication from a reviewer of an earlier draft of this article.

reflected on these issues in the months following my father's death, I eventually generated an argument for belief in an afterlife and a deeper spiritual meaning and justice behind our life experiences which I would later characterize as a modified version of Pascal's Wager.

Pascal's Wager is of course the idea, developed by Blaise Pascal, that it is rational to adopt a religious faith—to 'bet' on religion, so to speak—because, given (to again use Hick's phrase) the religious ambiguity of the universe, the potential benefits of having faith far outweigh the potential costs. Pascal's Wager, of course, operates in a Christian framework. Pascal is arguing for faith in Christ, on the view that, if one places one's faith in Christ, and one turns out to be right in placing this wager, then the reward is eternal life. If one turns out to be wrong, one is simply wrong, and is, in any case, as dead and gone as everyone else will eventually be, and no great harm is done. If one rejects faith, though, on the basis of lack of evidence, and one turns out to be wrong, then it is possible that one will lose one's eternal soul. And again, if one turns out to be right in rejecting faith, one is still just as dead in the end as if one had had faith, and without the consolation which that faith may have given one during one's lifetime.

My modified version of Pascal's Wager operates from a more faith-neutral perspective, its 'bet' being not on Christian faith, specifically, but simply in a broader religious view that there is some kind of higher purpose at work in our lives, and that this includes some kind of justice after death for all the sufferings we have both endured ourselves and inflicted upon others. Just like in Pascal's Wager, though, the 'bet' is that, if religious convictions turn out to be true, and if one has accepted these, then one has opened oneself to, as I shall discuss in a moment, spiritual practices that enable one to have a sense of being in touch with ultimate reality, with all of the comfort that this contact brings, and a reasonable hope that one's loved ones who have died have not ceased to exist, and that all the suffering that has happened and continues to happen in the world will one day be rectified. If this turns out not to be true, then no harm has been done, because one simply dies at the end, but at least lived a life with some amount of consolation that faith was able to bring. If, on the other hand, one rejects a religious worldview on the basis of lack of evidence, it is far more difficult, though certainly not impossible, to navigate the storms of life, and to find comfort when faced with suffering and loss, and one is closed off from certain avenues of comfort that one might otherwise have enjoyed. And if one is correct in rejecting a religious worldview, then, again, one is just as dead in the end as the religious person, but without having had the comfort of faith in one's lifetime.

In addition to and in tandem with this Pascalsque thought process, I had also cultivated doxastic practices of prayer and meditation which helped sustain me in this time of trial. I often sensed what I believed to be the presence of God, supporting me in my sufferings and giving comfort. My basic theistic orientation was, and remains, central to my life.

While I was a devout Catholic, though, and possessed a sense of the sustaining presence of God in my life, I was also an open and independent minded one. There were aspects of the Roman Catholic—and more broadly, Christian—narrative that I found I could not reconcile with logic.

Two issues, specifically, disturbed me, and led me to explore the beliefs of many religious traditions, and not simply the one in which I happened to be raised, in order to find answers to my questions: to go beyond the walls of the tradition to which I had been acculturated.

The first was the question of the afterlife: of what happens to us—to our consciousness—on the death of the physical body. The materialist answer—that our consciousness simply ceases—had no appeal for me, seeming to be cosmically unfair, both to all those who have suffered terribly in the course of their lives, as well as to those who have caused great suffering to others without ever having to atone for that fact or gain an understanding of why their actions were wrong. But the Christian view that our lives are followed either by an eternity of bliss with God in heaven or an eternity of torment in hell was not appealing either. It seemed to me that I knew no one who was good enough to go to heaven or evil enough to go to hell. I found that most people, including my father and myself, were a mix of the good and the bad, the noble and the petty, the compassionate and the selfish. It seemed to me that, in a fair universe, our next life would be much like this one: a blend of good and bad, of joy and suffering, through which we would learn lessons and progress gradually toward final communion with God upon attaining perfection.

The second question had to do with the diversity of religions. The idea of many Christians that all

people other than Christians will, simply by virtue of following the faiths of their families, suffer eternal torment in hell made no sense to me at all, being utterly incompatible with the idea of a fair or just divinity, much less a loving and compassionate one. When a priest of the Maryknoll order who had been a missionary in India gave a sermon at our local church saying that he saw the presence of the holy spirit in other religions, such as Hinduism, this struck me as far closer to the authentic teaching of Christ than the idea of exclusivism. I spoke with him afterward, and he also spoke of the church as teaching “the fullness of truth.” His position was essentially what scholars have come to call inclusivism.

This disturbed me as well, though; for if the church did not include the idea of reincarnation to which I was leaning as a better account of the afterlife than the traditional one, then this cast doubt on the idea that it possessed the fullness of truth. Perhaps it merely possessed an important *part* of the truth, in its moral teachings and its teachings of the loving nature of God, while other religions possessed other important parts. This is, of course, the idea of religious pluralism, which I would later find articulated in the work of John Hick and others.

Finally, I was also listening a great deal to the Beatles, and was intrigued by their journey to India—and by George Harrison’s spiritual search in particular. I found ideas in Harrison’s songs very appealing to my emerging spiritual sensibility. Around this time, I also saw the film *Gandhi*, and was quite taken with the wisdom of the Mahatma. I began reading everything I could find on and by Gandhi. Simultaneously interested in science, and the intersections of science and religion, I was reading books like Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* and Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics*. I did not see any of this, at the time, as contradicting or conflicting with my Catholic worldview so much as supplementing and deepening it.

All of these books, and Harrison’s song lyrics and album cover art, referred to a text called the *Bhagavad Gītā*. I conceived a strong desire to read the *Bhagavad Gītā*, but had not yet come across it. Then, on a spring day in 1983, my grandmother asked me to help her at her stall at a flea market that was to be held in the parking lot of the local Methodist Church. My grandmother was deeply involved in handmade arts and crafts and frequently sold her items at such local sales, as well as purchasing things for her own use. I went to help her, but also in the hope of finding old sci-fi paperbacks and comic books: treasures which can often be found at these sales.

3.2 The encounter

At this flea market, coming across a table that looked promising, covered with paperbacks and old magazines, I found, on top of the book pile, a copy of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Specifically, it was the richly illustrated version of this text titled *Bhagavad Gita: As It Is*, published by ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. I opened the book, and the first words I read were, “Those who are wise lament neither for the living nor the dead. Never was there a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor all these kings; nor in the future shall any of us cease to be. As the embodied soul continually passes, in this body, from boyhood to youth, and then to old age, the soul similarly passes into another body at death. The self-realized soul is not bewildered by such a change.”¹¹

Although I have narrated and written about it many times, words still fail to capture what it was like to find that book, unexpectedly, and to read those words from it on that spring morning in the Methodist Church parking lot. I had a sensation which was not unlike that of receiving an electric shock, though not at all unpleasant, and a sense of deep peace swept over and through me. I sometimes say I felt like an extraterrestrial child who had been raised on earth by human beings suddenly coming across an artifact from my home planet. This book made so much *sense*. And it contained illustrations and artwork that resonated with me on many levels: intellectual, emotional, and spiritual.

I continued to page through the book, finding not only answers to my questions about the afterlife, in the form of the *Gītā*’s teaching on rebirth, but also responses to my concerns about the world’s religions and the possibility of ultimate salvation for all beings. At one point, God, in the form of Lord Krishna, says

¹¹ *Bhagavad Gita: As It Is*, Prabhupada, 21-24. The original verses are *Bhagavad Gītā* 2: 11b-13.

to his friend, the hero Arjuna: “In whatever way living beings approach me, thus do I receive them. All paths lead to me.”¹²

I bought the book for a quarter (twenty-five cents), and my spiritual journey intensified.

4 A conceptual framework for theological reflection without walls on this encounter

At the time that I found the *Bhagavad Gītā*, I felt very strongly that God had placed it in my path, and was speaking to me through the text of this book, confirming views toward which I was already feeling drawn, and articulating in words certain ideas that had not yet formed fully in my mind, but which were, at that point, still seeking expression.

This was, of course, a pre-systematic feeling. Applying strictly the criteria of the Roman Catholic Church to these experiences, I should have, some might argue, concluded that I was in the process of being deluded: that the tragedies I had suffered had left me susceptible to influences, perhaps even of a demonic nature, that were pulling me away from the faith of my upbringing. But my sense at the time was entirely the opposite: that my mind was being opened to a deepened way of understanding and practicing the faith I had held all along.

When I look back upon my life since the time of that encounter—a career trajectory leading to undergraduate study of theology at the University of Notre Dame; graduate study of religion as a master’s and then doctoral student at the University of Chicago; meeting and marrying my best friend and soulmate, a professional scholar of Japanese culture who is also both Indian and Hindu; becoming a professor religious studies at a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania; being active in my local Hindu temple and the wider Hindu community in North America; and taking initiation in the Vedanta Society as a devotee of the spiritual tradition taught by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda—I can definitely say that it was a life-changing moment, with tangible transformative effects upon all of my later choices.

But what are the conceptual tools for articulating this sense of a divine encounter in a way that is intellectually rigorous and theologically revealing? I have found that four ideas, together, have been useful in expressing my parking lot experience in a theologically meaningful way. It is not that other ideas might not also be useful. My aim here, though, is to focus on particular ideas that speak quite directly to the experience that I had. These are, from the Kashmir Śaiva tradition, the idea of *pratyabhijñā*, or ‘recognition’ of the divine presence dwelling within oneself; from the Advaita Vedānta tradition, the idea that the divinity within us is finally our very own Self; from the Vaiṣṇava tradition, in which the *Bhagavad Gītā* 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 capacities.

Again, it is not that there are no other ideas, from various traditions, that might be useful in articulating the encounter I had with the *Bhagavad Gītā* theologically, or that these same ideas are not also present in other traditions, but that these ideas, in these specific forms, are especially useful in this context, and are ones on which I have drawn in interpreting my life experience.

4.1 A Kashmir Śaiva contribution: *Pratyabhijñā* (recognition)

The theological concept that I have found captures my encounter with the *Bhagavad Gītā* most succinctly is the Kashmir Śaiva concept of *pratyabhijñā*, or ‘recognition.’ When I found and read this text for the first time, there was a sense of familiarity, as though the ‘voice’ in which it spoke was the same as the ‘voice’ that sustained me in my prayer life as a Catholic Christian.

¹² *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:11 (translation mine).

As expressed by its pre-eminent exponent, the tenth century Kashmir Śaiva philosopher, Utpaladeva, in his *Īśvara-pratyabhijñā-kārikās*, or *Verses on the Recognition of the Lord*, the idea of *pratyabhijñā* is that direct knowledge of oneself and direct knowledge of God—that is, Īśvara, the Lord, or Śiva—are one and the same. When one truly comprehends oneself, one is also, by extension, comprehending God, for God is all. Śiva is absolute consciousness, and this absolute consciousness has become all things. Śiva is all.¹³

Having, again, an open and skeptical mind, in conjunction with a predisposition toward the mystical and a strong commitment to cultivating a direct experience of the divine through prayer and meditation—a commitment deepened by the need sparked by my experiences of suffering and tragedy—I sometimes asked myself if the inner voice that I heard in my prayer life was God or if I was really just talking to myself. I could discern a difference between what I felt in the depths of prayer and the voice of my own thoughts; but I also had a sense that the God with whom I was in communion was also, in some sense, a part of me (or I a part of Him-Her-It). I am not sure where or when I began to use this language, but I came to think of the God within as my ‘higher self,’ in contrast with my conscious ego and personality, with all its various faults and limitations. Again, I felt that I recognized the ‘voice’ that spoke through the *Bhagavad Gītā* as the same as the ‘voice’ that I heard in my spiritual practice: the voice of God within, of the ‘higher self.’

4.2 An Advaitic contribution: Recognition of the Divine as recognition of the self

The Śaiva concept of *pratyabhijñā*, clearly, is deeply non-dualistic. The recognition here is that one’s own self and the ultimate reality are not, in the end, fully separable, and are finally one being. This, of course, is also the core teaching of Advaita, or non-dualist, Vedānta, as taught by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, the late eighth and early ninth century teacher most prominently associated with this school of thinking. According to Advaita Vedānta, all is Brahman (*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*), and Brahman is pure consciousness (*prajñānaṃ brahma*).¹⁴

4.3 A Vaiṣṇava contribution: The engaged personal deity of the Bhagavad Gītā

Seemingly in tension with this idea of divinity as residing at the core of one’s being—and as, ultimately, one with oneself—there is the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gītā* itself, and the Vaiṣṇava tradition of which it is a part, in which God, not unlike in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is the Supreme Being, distinct from the world, but also lovingly engaged with it, even to the point of intervening in the events of time and history. Distinctly from the Abrahamic religions, though, the Vaiṣṇava tradition teaches that God—Viṣṇu—descends into the world as an *avatāra* or avatar (which literally means ‘descent’), not only sending messengers, as in Judaism and Islam, or appearing in the world once for all time, as in Christianity, but coming personally into the world whenever there is a need for Him to do so. As the *Gītā* states: “Whenever the cosmic order (*dharma*) declines and chaos arises, then, Arjuna, I manifest myself, to destroy evil and restore the good.”¹⁵ Along with the sense of recognition of the voice of my own higher self which I found in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, there was, simultaneously, a sense of the Other. My feeling was not only of an inner divinity—of a God within—with whose ‘voice’ the words of the text resonated. There was also the sense that the entire situation in which I had found the text had been orchestrated by an outside force, quite distinct from my finite self and ego: that my experience was not something that I had deliberately brought about, for I could not have done so, but an act of divine grace. The sheer unlikeliness of finding the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the parking lot of the Methodist Church of Montgomery City was a large part of this sense.

¹³ Shankarananda, *The Yoga of Kashmir Shaivism: Consciousness Is Everything*, 45.

¹⁴ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14.1 and *Aitareya Upaniṣad* 3.3, respectively.

¹⁵ *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:7-8.

4.4 A Whiteheadian contribution: The Divine lure

Is there a way to bring together these two seemingly incompatible understandings, drawn, as they are, from two quite distinct strands of Hindu tradition? The non-dualism of the Kashmir Śaiva and Advaita Vedānta traditions, which give conceptual grounding to the sense of interiority that was central to this experience, and the Vaiṣṇava dualism which clearly differentiates between the Supreme Lord and those on whom He bestows His grace, which was equally central to it?

If one looks to the theistic philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, one finds a very clearly articulated sense of divinity as both distinct from—transcendent of—and present within—immanent to—each and every moment of our experience. God, for Whitehead, does not stand wholly outside of the cosmic process, but rather guides it from within, even while being distinct from it. God, says Whitehead, “does not create the world, he saves it: or, more accurately, he is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness.”¹⁶ God does this, according to Whitehead, by serving as the “lure for feeling.” At each new moment of one’s existence, God is present as the “subjective aim” of that moment, leading one to manifest that aim, though the specific form this aim will take in a given moment is determined by the free choice of the individual entity.¹⁷

God, to paraphrase George Harrison, is both “within you and without you.” The Supreme Being—the Lord, Īśvara, Śiva, Kṛṣṇa—is both distinct from us as individual selves, as entities in the cosmos, in the realm of space and time, but also dwelling in all of us and drawing us ever nearer to ‘Him’self. Indeed, one meaning of the name Kṛṣṇa is ‘the attractive one.’ This fits in very well with a Whiteheadian conception of God. It also provides an excellent conceptual model for what I experienced in the Methodist Church parking lot all those years ago.

4.5 The contribution of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda: The both/and approach

This Whiteheadian approach is also a kind of conceptual mirror, couched in the language of Western thought, for what I have called the Ramakrishna tradition’s “both/and” approach to the question of whether dualism or non-dualism is a better account of the nature of ultimate reality.¹⁸ This is the tradition—rooted in the teachings of the nineteenth century Bengali sage Ramakrishna and propagated to the Western world by his pre-eminent disciple, Swami Vivekananda—in which I eventually found a spiritual home, drawn to its teaching of religious pluralism and free inquiry.

Divinity, according to Ramakrishna, can be conceptualized as both the infinite absolute of Advaita Vedānta and as the loving Supreme Being of theistic traditions. He referred to the absolute as the “Nitya,” or eternal, and the relative, related, engaged side of divinity as the “Līlā,” or divine play. “Both the Līlā and the Nitya belong to the same Reality. In one form It is the Absolute, and in another, the Līlā.”¹⁹

This is one of the chief similarities, but also one of the chief differences, between Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis and the Vedānta of Ramakrishna (which, I would argue, was influential upon Hick’s thought). One might think that the Absolute might refer to the divine noumenon and the divine play to the divine phenomena of Hick’s thought. But Hick argues that divine ‘personae’ and ‘impersonae’—concepts of divinity as personal and impersonal—are both modes of experiencing the Real, and are not the Real itself. This is not unlike Ramakrishna’s teaching that the Absolute and the divine play both “belong to the same Reality.” The ultimate aim of Vedānta, though, in the tradition of Ramakrishna, is to experience Reality Itself: to go beyond, albeit by means of, the conceptions of divinity that we hold and that shape our spiritual experience, at least in preliminary stages of the spiritual path. And of course any attempt to describe the experience

¹⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, 346.

¹⁷ Ibid, 85.

¹⁸ Long, “Advaita and Dvaita: Bridging the Gap—The Ramakrishna Tradition’s ‘both/and’ Approach to the Dvaita/Advaita Debate.”

¹⁹ Nikhilananda, trans., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 801.

of the ultimate is going to occur in the language of a particular tradition and culture. Constructivism is true to this extent. But, like Alston, Ramakrishna holds—and most religious teachers through history—that one does finally *perceive* the Real. The attempt, in the spiritual life, is precisely to go beyond concepts to encounter and experience the Real Itself.

5 Reflecting upon the encounter

A critic might well argue that what I have done in this essay is simply to offer a grab-bag of ideas from various traditions and thinkers, Hindu and Western, that suit my own interpretation of my experience in the Methodist Church parking lot. This is a fair criticism, especially if one is wedded to the idea that religious experience can only be defined by the criteria and practices of a particular community and tradition.

But what if the ultimate reality should want to break down the barriers between traditions? What if there are truths that cannot be contained in one tradition alone? What if coming upon these truths requires one to rethink one's religious allegiances, perhaps even changing them in order to better reflect what one believes? Or to start an altogether new tradition—which, as the very existence of traditions demonstrates, many people have certainly done over the course of history?

A theology without walls, it seems, will answer the question, “How does one know that a certain experience is a genuine encounter with ultimate reality?” by doing, essentially, what I have done here: ignoring the walls, the boundaries between traditions, and running with those concepts that fit the situation at hand. If the ultimate reality is, as so many traditions have affirmed, infinite, it would seem to follow that the ways to approach that reality are similarly vast, as are the number of persons approaching It and the circumstances that draw them to undertake the spiritual quest. The conceptual resources for evaluating these experiences must be similarly vast and flexible. The requirements of scholarly rigor would seem to require that the conceptual resources one employs be logically compatible with one another; and the moral requirements shared across traditions, as discussed earlier, would similarly require that the evaluation of one's putative encounter with the ultimate reality have an ethical dimension.

I do not think the experience I have narrated led me to become an evil person, or at least no worse than I was prior to it. A conservative Christian might argue that it led to my apostasy, and so that it certainly did lead me to become an evil person. By this standard, though, all persons of other religions are evil. Such exclusivism seems to be a sure recipe for endless conflict. It is also not obvious that the conceptual resources I have drawn upon, at least in a tentative way, are deeply logically incompatible. Non-dualism and dualism appear, on the surface, to be logically incompatible; but when they are drawn together as part of a complex worldview, like that offered by the Ramakrishna tradition and by Whitehead (as well as by the Jain tradition, which I explore in depth elsewhere), their differences are not seen as contradictions, but as complementarities.²⁰

6 Conclusion

A theology without walls is a project that is still in its infancy, and the reflections outlined here are, I will be the first to admit, very sketchy and tentative: a first, rough draft, as it were, of how such a theology might approach the question of the validity of a claim to have encountered ultimate reality. It is offered, though, in the hope that it might spark more such exploration, and suggest the potential richness of this approach to theological questions.

At the bare minimum, in regard to constructivism, the account offered here suggests that an alternative to strong constructivism is available, at least for those who are willing to incorporate some idea of an ultimate reality into their worldviews. Certainly, a reductionist account could well be given of the experiences I have described here—one that would likely emphasize, for example, the multicultural context of late capitalism in which I grew up, which enabled a mixing of traditions and influences that created the conditions in

²⁰ Long, *Jainism: An Introduction*, 117-171.

which experiences like mine could occur. As useful as such an account may be in elucidating the *material conditions* which make a certain type of experience possible, such an account loses the *theological* dimension this account provides: that, if there indeed is an ultimate reality, it is amenable to being experienced in this way, through the lenses of many traditions, and not, as some constructivist accounts have assumed, solely through the lens of a single tradition and its doxastic practices. The ultimate reality, this account suggests is *pluralistic*. In an historical period marked by violent clashes among adherents of many traditions and worldviews, advancing a pluralistic view, that finds validity in many traditions, is certainly a desideratum, and arguably a more productive approach than one which simply rules out religious traditions *a priori* as lacking validity.

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