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[Review]

**[Review of] Robert C. Neville (ed.):
The Human Condition: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas
Project; Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious
Ideas Project; Religious Truth: A Volume in the Comparative
Religious Ideas Project**

Kevin Schilbrack

Book review

Robert C. Neville (ed.), *The Human Condition: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001, xxvi + 337 pages, Hb \$74.50, pb \$25.95
Robert C. Neville (ed.), *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001, xxvi + 363 pages, Hb \$74.50, pb \$25.95
Robert C. Neville (ed.), *Religious Truth: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001, xxiv + 339 pages, Hb \$79.50, pb \$27.95

This trilogy represents a high-water mark for comparative philosophy of religion.

The basic premise of the project is simple: it brings tradition specialists in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Chinese Religions together with generalists interested in comparing religious ideas. The specialists spell out how the six traditions understand the nature of ultimate realities, the human condition, and religious truth. Then the generalists, Robert Neville and Wesley Wildman, gather that work and draw out similarities and differences. This is a very self-reflective work, replete with meta-discussions of method, appendices on the experience of working on the project, and annotated bibliographies, a second-order apparatus that is very valuable – or not – depending on the reader's interests. In the first place, though, these books are worthy of note simply because in an age of skepticism about cross-cultural comparisons, they go out in a workmanlike style and do it. As Peter Berger notes in a foreword, in a time when particularism dominates the study of

religions and religions are treated as Leibnizian monads impenetrable by generalizing concepts, the very existence of these books stands as a challenge to postmodern epistemological assumptions (*The Human Condition*, xiii).

The volumes have two goals. The first is to make the comparisons between ideas of these six religions; the second is to present and to test Neville's theory of comparison. On this theory, comparing is properly a three-stage process. First, the comparatist must formulate a vague category as the respect in which disparate things are compared. All categories will emerge from some historical and cultural context, so they need to be abstracted and made vague enough not to privilege any of the entities that fall within them. Second, because the category is so generic, it does not suffice simply to apply it to what is being compared. One must also show how adherents of the various religions specify the category. And then, third, the specifications need to be translated into the language of the comparative category. In this way, the language of the vague category becomes enriched by the distinctions in the various specifications. Neville's theory reflects Charles Peirce's semiotics, but it is presented in a straightforward and jargon-free style, and it too stands as a challenge to those who argue that comparison is always biased.

A product of Boston University's multiyear, interdisciplinary 'Comparative Religious Ideas Project,' this trilogy invites comparison to the multiyear, interdisciplinary project at the University of Chicago Divinity School that produced three anthologies in the series 'Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions' (Frank E. Reynolds and David Tracy (eds.), *Myth and Philosophy* [SUNY, 1990]; *Discourse and Practice* [SUNY, 1992]; and *Religion and Practical Reason* [SUNY, 1994]). The Chicago books also brought tradition specialists together with philosophers of religion to advance comparative projects. But the Chicago editors did not ask their authors to address specific questions and therefore those volumes are diffuse (to put it kindly), pairing papers with disparate methods and subject matters together post hoc under arbitrary rubrics like 'Practice.' In these books, by contrast, the authors are required to speak to the three philosophical categories, and though the appendices report that they sometimes chafed, it is also true that they produced a focused and hence useful exploration of the teachings of these six religions on these three topics. In fact, one might see this project as taking Clifford Geertz's definition of religion and turning it into a Lakatosstyle

research program. Geertz famously defines religion as a way of life that embodies a conception of the general order of existence or a worldview. These books unpack Geertz's idea of a religious worldview as the three themes represented in the titles. They replace Geertz with an interdisciplinary team. And instead of defining religion in a stipulated way, they make a series of interpretations that they present as vulnerable and open to correction.

The individual essays that make up the body of the three volumes can be read in two ways. On the one hand, they can be read as accounts by specialists of what the six traditions teach about the three categories, and then comparative summaries by generalists. On this reading, the books represent a nice bit of interdisciplinary teamwork and a valuable resource for scholars wanting a handy account of, for instance, Jewish ideas of religious truth or Chinese ideas of the human condition. This is how the volumes present themselves.

On the other hand, the books can also be read as an exercise in which Neville has a special role, not unlike a rider trying to coax skittish animals into a pen. On this reading, the volumes display much more struggle. First, a general category is proposed and subcategories are suggested. Then, each of the tradition specialists, in an exercise that involves an enormous amount of creativity and insight, selects a text or small set of texts and puts it in conversation with those categories. Sometimes the categories and the selected texts 'click,' but sometimes there is only a partial match. And sometimes the tradition specialist doesn't want to play at all.

Here is an example. The volume on ultimate reality distinguishes between what is ultimate in an ontological sense and what is ultimate in an anthropological sense. What is ultimate in the ontological sense is that aspect of reality the religion considers greatest; what is ultimate in the anthropological sense is that aspect of a person's life that the religion makes central, her or his ultimate concern. In this way Neville specifies the general category of ultimacy in two subcategories. But in the section on Chinese religions, Livia Kohn and James Miller hold that the Chinese have no proper terms to translate these ideas. Creating terms to express them produces neologisms that are 'absurd' and 'senseless,' and they quote several scholars who say that western interpreters who seek an ultimate reality in Chinese religions distort them (11–14). They suggest that even the anthropological sense of ultimacy

is not relevant in this context because, 'unlike other religions, the Chinese acknowledge that, beyond the most vague descriptions of such experiences as a sense of harmony or transcendence, they are utterly personal and subjective' (13). Faced with this recalcitrance, Neville has to object, and he does. He argues that by suggesting that the Chinese religious ideal is utterly subjective and not a universal ultimate in the anthropological sense, Kohn and Miller are themselves misrepresenting the Chinese materials (156–158). 'Would they agree that some categories for harmony and transcendence for instance, getting richer than anyone else, are materially foolish? Is not the Dao the only way to transcendence and harmony?' And granted that the Chinese religions do not speak of an ultimate as a static substance, the Chinese texts cannot speak of living in accord with the Dao, unless the Dao is an ultimate reality in the ontological sense as well.

I call attention to this internal struggle not to impugn the books but to underscore how much hermeneutic skill is involved in comparing religious ideas, and that this skill is present in these volumes. It is not a question of a cookie cutter approach. (It seems to me also that this would be a good way to ask a class to read these essays.) The end result, then, is a comparison of the three ideas in the six religions that is valuable because it is so carefully done.