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Philosophy of Religion

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Ineffability as a Unifying Characteristic for World Religions

One of the most important questions in philosophy of religion is whether or not there is a unifying concept or characteristic amongst every religion. With the seemingly endless number of religions in the world today, it is extremely difficult to find such a unifying characteristic. They have differing views about the number of Gods that exist, the characteristics of their higher power(s), the creation of the universe, and the workings of the universe. However, despite the many apparent differences amongst the various religions, the concept of ineffability is a constant factor in each religion. Whether it is through a God or through ritualistic experiences, every religion has strong evidence of ineffability. I will show evidence for ineffability in Daoism, West African religions, Sikhism, and Christian Mysticism, but first we must look at a more in depth description of ineffability and clearly define what we are comparing amongst these religions.

Ineffability can be defined as transcending human understanding and ability to put into words. Ineffability is a complex topic that can be further clarified to better suit our comparison. Perhaps the most important distinction to make is what classifies something as effable versus ineffable. There is no clear distinction between the two, leading us to think of ineffability as having different degrees ranging from absolute ineffability to complete effability. Something completely ineffable would be completely beyond human comprehension, so we could not even begin to discuss or think about such an object. Because we cannot discuss or conceive objects

that are completely ineffable, when we define a concept as ineffable we mean it is relatively close to absolute ineffability on our spectrum. For example, describing a God as ineffable would mean we are labeling it as close to, but not the same as, absolute ineffability on our spectrum. On the opposite end of the spectrum, an object that is completely effable would be perfectly understood amongst all humans. However, even a concept as simple as the color blue would not be completely effable because all people perceive slightly different shades. Since most people can communicate and generally understand what is meant by the concept of the color blue, the color blue would fall close to, but not be the same as, complete effability on the spectrum. The point of these comparisons is to show that concepts can have varying degrees of ineffability, and that everything falls somewhere in between completely ineffable and completely effable. In relation to our comparison of religions, this could mean that although different Gods are described as being ineffable, they may have differing degrees of ineffability.

After clarifying that ineffability has varying degrees rather than a rigid all-or-nothing structure, we must clarify the difference between ineffable objects versus ineffable experiences. In many religions, the ineffable object is an ineffable higher power. Daoists say that the Dao “is beyond the human capacity for comprehension, especially through linguistic, conceptual, and intellectual frameworks” (Komjathy 111). That is, the Dao as a concept is incomprehensible; it is not an individual’s experience with the Dao that is being described as ineffable. On the contrary, an individual may have an experience with an effable object but be unable to describe the experience through words; the experience was ineffable. For example, music can be seen as effable because it has commonly understood principles that allow musicians to comprehend it throughout time; it is written in scores with specific time signatures and beats. A practiced musician can pick up a piece of sheet music and play it based on these commonly understood

symbols, but a listener may be very emotionally moved from hearing the music. His unique, emotional experience hearing the music may be beyond his ability to communicate with words, making it ineffable. In this case the object, the music, was not ineffable, but the individual experience with the object was ineffable. While most religions have an ineffable God or object, some religions (as we will discuss throughout this paper) do not. However, all of the religions we have studied throughout this course involve ineffability through either an ineffable object (such as a higher power) or ineffable ritualistic experiences.

The final aspect of ineffability to discuss before beginning our comparison is how to evaluate whether or not something qualifies as ineffable. Due to the nature of ineffable experiences as being incommunicable through language, there is no easy, objective criterion for comparing these experiences. Because we are not the ones having the experience, the best we can do is to look at descriptions of the ineffable object or experience in written religious texts or through firsthand accounts of the religious experiences. Thus, religious texts and firsthand accounts of religious experiences will be the primary sources cited to give evidence of ineffability.

After clarifying the concept of ineffability and how to evaluate it, we can begin analyzing ineffability in Daoism. Komjathy gives very direct evidence that the Dao is an ineffable concept within Daoism: "It is a mystery so mysterious that it is beyond mysteriousness...It can be directly experienced and participated in, and humans can cultivate a greater sensitivity to its presence, in whatever form it takes" (Komjathy 113). In terms of degrees of ineffability, the Dao falls the closest to absolute ineffability out of all the higher powers we encountered throughout our study of religion because it transcends human language to the point that it cannot even be named - "The Way is eternally nameless" (Li and Mair 76). The Dao also transcends all human

ability to describe through words. "One who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know (Li and Mair 19)". Thus, even if someone attempts to describe the Dao, they are no longer talking about it. A further description of the ineffability of the Dao is given in the Chuang Tzu in a story of the Yellow Emperor. Knowledge asks Dumb Nonaction, Mad Stammerer, and the Yellow Emperor questions about the Dao. Dumb Nonaction does not respond, Mad Stammerer attempts to respond but cannot find the right words, and the Yellow Emperor gives a description. However, Dumb Nonaction and Mad Stammerer are much closer to understanding the Dao than the Yellow Emperor because they are unable to describe it. (Mair 210-212). There is very strong evidence throughout the Daoist religious texts for the ineffability of the Dao.

As opposed to Daoism which has a clearly ineffable higher power, the Dozos do not seem to have an ineffable higher power. Instead of focusing on an ineffable higher power, the Dozo rituals seem to focus on communicating with dead spirits such as Manimory, the first Dozo. Communication with Manimory plays an important part in rituals such as initiating new Dozos, but this communication is not through words. Through the favorable landing of kola nut shells, Manimory is able to give approval for the initiation of a new Dozo (Hellweg 66). Not only do the Dozos communicate with the dead through tossing kola nuts, but communication also occurs in the form of dream signs. "Allah sent dreams to dozos in which Manimory told them to make sacrifices. Manimory cannot speak...but could communicate through images" (Hellweg 86). Even in the dreams, Manimory's communication still transcends human language and takes the form of symbols. The fact that the Dozos could only have indirect communication with the dead spirits through interpreting symbols is evidence that the dead spirits and Manimory are ineffable to a certain degree. However, the ability for the Dozos to have any communication with Manimory makes him less ineffable than the Dao. Even though it is to a lesser degree than

Daoism, ineffability is still evident in the Dozo “religion” due to the inability to communicate with Manimory through words.

Contrary to Daoism and Dozo “religion”, ineffability in the Ndembu religion is more evident in the ritualistic experiences than in a particular higher power. For the Ihamba ritual performed in the Ndembu culture, words are very powerful and cause ineffable ritualistic experiences. Even though words themselves are effable, the experience of the ritual participants when hearing these words is ineffable. Turner documented her firsthand experience in an Ihamba ritual, making it easy to see from a firsthand perspective the ineffability of the ritual experience. After many verbal exchanges and rhythmic clapping, Meru (the woman who the ritual was performed on) had “a giant thing emerging out of the flesh of her back. This thing was a large gray blob about six inches across, a deep gray opaque thing emerging a sphere” (Turner 149). The large gray blob was the evil spirit causing Meru pain, and after it was removed she experienced a spiritual healing. Logically, it does not make sense for a tooth to be removed from Meru’s back and cause a spiritual healing. Because the experience cannot be explained logically and transcends human understanding, it was ineffable. Even in a religion where ineffability is not found in a higher power, it can still be found in the ritualistic experiences of that religion.

Continuing on to Sikhism, ineffability is apparent in both the Sikh God and the experiences of the Gurus. In Singh’s lecture, she described that Guru Nanak had a mystical experience that gave him revelations about God. However, he said that the experience was beyond human comprehension. Attempts were made to represent the experience pictorially and metaphorically, but they could not completely capture the experience. Not only can ineffability be found in the mystical experience of Guru Nanak, but it can also be found in the description of God. “God... is beyond human comprehension and can only be known by gracious self-

revelation. (Cole 328). Although God is described to be beyond human comprehension, the Sikh Gurus are enlightened and can speak the word of God. Relative to Daoism, the Sikh God seems less ineffable because the Daoists cannot even place a name to their higher power while the Sikh Gurus seem to understand God's word. Overall, Sikhism demonstrates ineffability both in a higher power and in the mystical experiences of the Gurus.

The last religion we will look at for evidence of ineffability is Christian Mysticism. In Christian mysticism, like in Sikhism, God is ineffable and the mystical experiences themselves are ineffable. Clement gave a very straightforward description of the ineffability of God: "He is the God of the universe, who is above all speech, all conception, all thought, can never be committed to writing, being inexpressible even by His own power... God is invisible and beyond expression by words" (Fanning 23). This description of God fits perfectly with our definition of ineffability. Regarding the ineffability of the mystical experiences themselves, mystics have reported physical sensations associated with being filled with the Holy Spirit along with speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues is ineffable because these people do not even know the language they are speaking; the words are just flowing out of them. The text has a description of one of Paul's mystical experiences which demonstrates the ineffability of the experience: "[Paul] rose up to the third heaven and then he passed even beyond it to paradise, where he 'heard things which must not and cannot be put into language'" (Fanning 18). Christian Mysticism has very strong evidence of ineffability in both God and the mystical experiences themselves.

As we have seen, ineffability is present in every religion we have analyzed whether it is in the form of a higher power or religious experiences. However, what is the significance of having this common characteristic? One potential result would be an explanation for religious pluralism, demonstrating that it is possible for so many religions to coexist and be equally valid.

Hick differentiated between a Real as such and a Real as experienced by different human communities (Hick 236). The Real as such is the true God or higher power, while the Real as experienced is the manifestation of the Real in human experiences. Many traditions acknowledge the difference between the Real as such and the Real as experienced. For example, the Daoists acknowledge that “the Dao that can be expressed is not the eternal Dao” (Hick 237). If the Real as such can never be truly known because it is ineffable, then it is possible that all religions are dealing with the same Real as such and have different interpretations of the same Ultimate Reality. Because different people and different cultures have much different background knowledge, they will have different interpretations of the Real as such when they try to make sense of it within the context of their world. The Dao and God would then be attempts to describe the same Real as such, although interpreted differently through different cultures. The fact that Daoists, Sikhs, and Christian Mystics all acknowledge that their higher power is ineffable makes it very possible that they are all the same in the sense that they worship the same Real as such.

However, the African religions discussed thus far do not have an ineffable higher power in the same way that the other religions we examined have one, so they do not fit in with the Real as such explanation. Does this prove to be a counterexample to Hick’s religious pluralist hypothesis? I think to answer this question we must consider whether or not it is appropriate to compare the African religions in the same way as the other religions. One important piece of information is that the African religions are only labeled religions by Westerners. There was no word for religion in their language, and they saw the rituals as a part of their regular daily lives. The focus of these “religions” is to perform rituals to aid in providing the basic human necessities of food, water, and health. This focus is significantly different than the focus of the

other main religions we have been comparing. Often, religions are concerned with problems such as the afterlife or reincarnation. These topics are much more complex than food and health, suggesting they require a more complex explanation. This complex explanation is where an ineffable higher power comes into play in the majority of the religions we have analyzed.

Because the focus of the African religions is so different, I do not think it is a fair comparison to treat them the same way in terms of ineffability. The absence of an ineffable higher power in these religions doesn't prove to be a counterexample to the pluralist hypothesis, but instead reflects the different objective of these religions. Just because these religions don't specifically address an ineffable higher power does not mean that they do not experience the same Real as such as every other religion. Hick's pluralistic hypothesis still upholds despite the absence of a Real as such in the African religions.

Overall, ineffability is a very complex subject that is present in some shape or form in each of the religions we have discussed throughout our course. Although we see varying degrees of ineffability amongst these religions, the fact that they all demonstrate ineffability supports Hick's pluralistic hypothesis that every religion has the same Real as such and simply differs in the Real as experienced-and-thought. Based on my analysis of ineffability in the different religions we studied this year, I think the strong evidence of ineffability in every religion supports Hick's pluralistic hypothesis.

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