

THE UNIVERSAL CONTEXT

In the twentieth century, through the discipline of psychology, humanity began to study its own subjective awareness. Prior to that, the primary focus of inquiry had been the outer world of nature. Psychoanalysis and other schools within depth psychology sought to understand psychopathology of the person in terms of the dynamics of component parts of the psyche: id, ego, superego, defenses, drives, needs, self-concept, motives, persona, archetypes, and so forth. Behavioral psychology examined habits and behavioral patterns established by conditioning or reinforcement. Other branches of psychology studied component functions of

the mind such as memory, sensation, perception, and cognition. The intent has always been to understand individuals—their capabilities, behavior, development, conflicts, and psychopathology—through an analysis of various subsystems or processes within the total spectrum of human functioning.

Other branches of psychology and the social sciences enlarged the field of inquiry. Social psychology and family systems theory/therapy have sought to understand the individual in the context of the group. The study of group dynamics, social perception, interpersonal attraction, or shifting alliances and hierarchies within the family system, all provide a deeper

understanding of how individuals function in and are affected by groups. Sociology and anthropology have enlarged the context of inquiry still further to include the individual's society or culture. To understand socialization is to explain how an individual's personality or behavior is shaped by the culture in which he or she lives. While these disciplines often take an entire society or culture as their unit of study, their major thrust is to understand how the individual functions in and is affected by the larger culture into which he or she is born.

Each of these disciplines has attempted to explain religion in terms of its own territory.

Freud viewed religious beliefs as infantile

fantasies and religious motivation as a wish to return to maternal symbiosis. While Jung had a much less reductive view of religion, in his published writings he always viewed religious processes and experiences as strictly psychological phenomena. Sociology and anthropology regard religions as cultural constructs whose function is to provide a meaningful view of the world as well as social cohesion. Religions are social institutions developed to serve very specific societal functions; the question of their intrinsic validity, if even relevant, is outside the purview of social science.

What is the *context* in which religion itself operates? It seems evident that if we are to understand religion on its *own* terms (not explain it in terms of psychological or sociological constructs), then the proper context would be the entire cosmos. Religion focuses on the individual's experience, development, and relationship with the cosmos. In brief, the context is the *entire universe*. Moreover, "entire universe" does not mean just the physical universe. Certainly religion is not talking about our relationship with galaxies or the big bang. A more accurate definition of "entire universe" would be "all that exists" — reality in its broadest reach or totality. In previous essays it has been proposed that such a reality *has to* contain a lot

more than just the physical universe, however grand that may be, for it encompasses values, meanings, qualities, and the full scope of what might be implied by the concepts of the “mind” and “consciousness.” We are talking about a multi-tiered universe that has the physical universe as its *outward visible aspect* (which is the proper object of science) but then transitions into subtle and conscious aspects we cannot physically observe but can experience intuitively. Please see the essay: “*The Scope of the Universe: The Nonphysical Universe.*”

To raise spiritual or religious questions, then, is to raise questions about our experiences in the context of—and in relationship with—the

cosmos in its totality, what might be called the *universal context*.

Religions have explored and sought to understand this universal context for thousands of years. However, they typically codify original revelations into cultural belief systems and then create institutions and customs around these beliefs. In short, they structure prophetic revelations about the cosmos into a specific set of beliefs, practices, and customs that become a particular creed, such as Christianity or Hinduism. Factions then develop, leading to a variety of different sects or denominations within the original religion. Each religion has its

own history that can and has been readily studied by the social sciences.

The Experiential Core of Religions

The mystical or prophetic core of each religion retains a more direct connection with the cosmos—the universal context—because it remains grounded in direct experience. Such experiences may be prefigured by cultural categories (Sally may have a vision of Jesus while Sita has one of Shiva), but they tend not to be encrusted in dogmatic beliefs or used to prescribe how one should behave. In its essence, the mystical, experiential core of religion precedes culture and is often referred to simply as “spirituality.” For the purposes of this essay,

then, spirituality can be defined as the individual's *direct experience of and relationship with the cosmos at large*. Various religions or metaphysical systems refer to this ultimate reality as God, Allah, Brahma, the Creator, the Infinite, Nirvana, the Divine, Cosmic Consciousness, Source, the One, and so on. The names may differ according to culture or tradition, but the *context* referred to remains the same.

Because this direct experience arises from intuitive and visionary faculties rather than the senses, an “objective science” of the universal context is probably impossible. Replicable *sensory* experiences of spiritual realities —

equally apparent to everyone — are just not available, in the way those of the physical world are. Since the time of Francis Bacon, science has been based on repeatable sensory experience. Thus it would be hard to develop an objective science of spiritual realities even if we wanted to. Most likely, though, we would not want to, because to recast the sacred — the numinous — into the object language of science would be to flatten it — to squeeze the awe, beauty, mystery, and grandeur out of it. What would be left is a gross reduction of the inherent *quality* of spiritual phenomena. One can certainly study comparative religions in a dispassionate way, but this will not lead to any *spiritual understanding*, which is acquired experientially

through insight and revelation, what in times past was referred to as *gnosis*.

A Continuum of Contexts

It is helpful to see the universal context on a *continuum* with less inclusive contexts such as culture, society, and family, in understanding human development, behavior, and pathology.

It is simply *the most inclusive context* for understanding ourselves, our lives, and our development and destiny in this world. It moves us one step further out from the contexts implied by anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Spiritual/religious inquiry shares with the social sciences a *participatory* approach to knowledge, but one applied to the context of

the entire cosmos rather than a specific group or culture. A strong case can be made that the social sciences are “soft” sciences in the sense that they often require a participative approach to their subjects of study---groups and cultures—unlike the “hard” sciences of physics, chemistry, and biology. Groups and cultures have an interior, subjective aspect; they are not just objects like atoms and molecules.

Because knowledge of the universal context arises fundamentally from our direct inner experience, we can experience it apart from any particular culture-based religion. It is there for any person to become aware of and investigate prior to codifying it in terms of any specific

religious faith or metaphysical system. Its existence and operation goes on quite apart from all human attempts to interpret it.

If the universal context is on a continuum with cultural, social, and psychological contexts—is not something radically separate—then spiritual growth is on a continuum with personal psychological growth. Just as there are concepts and principles that help to illuminate psychological growth (what we would get from studying undergraduate psychology courses or attending a personal growth workshop), so there are concepts and principles that can help to illuminate spiritual growth. Again, we have the choice to adopt these from specific religions

or from other (usually metaphysical) conceptions that have developed outside of any particular religion. We can draw on Christianity or theosophy, Judaism or Kabbalah, Buddhism or *A Course in Miracles*. Some of us may choose to draw on concepts and principles from a variety of sources. Whatever spiritual conceptions we choose to believe (for example, notions about personal karmic lessons, redemption and grace, the law of attraction, or co-creation with God of our soul's intentions), they are personally validated *because they can help us make sense of our personal spiritual experiences and their meaning for our life.*

That is, they are validated *existentially*, rather than empirically, as in science. For each of us individually, the final criterion for accepting or rejecting a particular spiritual principle or concept is whether it helps us to understand and make sense of our own personal life experience. It does not serve us to adopt beliefs that conflict with our personal life experience or “gut feeling” simply because we were raised in a tradition that told us to believe them.

The Validity of Spiritual Experience

Do spiritual conceptions have any validity beyond one individual or group’s particular point of view? Postmodern relativism would say no. Religious and metaphysical frameworks are

simply cultural constructs that function to help a group or individual make sense of the world.

We invent them to try to explain the cosmos and to guide us in our actions toward each other, but beyond that, they have no inherent validity. This is also the position taken by conventional science. As discussed in several parts of this website, scientific materialism is a metaphysical assumption that has considerable evidence against it. The position taken here, and by anyone with sincere religious or spiritual convictions, is that spiritual “knowledge” gained through insight, intuition, and revelation is of something true and valid, just as real as the trees, mountains, and stars that most of us can see and agree upon with our eyes. What is

spoken of here as “the universal context” is just as real as the physical universe studied by the hard sciences. It is just the interior aspect or “interiority” of that universe, much as the content of our thoughts and feelings is the interior aspect of the brain’s processes. Call it “consciousness on the largest scale.”

Consensual validation of the universal context is harder to come by than it is in the natural sciences that study the outer world, but points of consensus are possible and eventually are likely to be achieved cross- culturally by culturally independent explorations of this realm. This is already beginning to happen in fields such as transpersonal psychology and

transpersonal philosophy. Such fields take the universal context as a topic for disciplined study and systematic investigation. For a more detailed discussion of these broadened perspectives on the nature of valid knowing and “truth,” see the Prologue to this website.

At present there is an enormous multiplicity of religions and metaphysical systems that attempt to describe and explain the universal context. If what they are all referring to is ultimately *real*, can we ever arrive at one, uniform body of knowledge/understanding such as exists for the natural world in science? The likely answer is “not any time soon.” Understanding the universal context through existential insight,

intuition, and revelation is always likely to be more subjective (subject to cultural and individual interpretation) than apprehending the physical world through our five senses. As suggested earlier, some cross-cultural consensus is likely to be achieved but not at the level possible in the natural sciences. A plurality of paradigms seems inevitable, at least for the foreseeable future. In fact, for *any* domain that relies on *participative* forms of knowing (such as empathy, intuition, or revelation), there is always going to be more divergence in perspective than in the hard sciences that rely solely on replicable sense- experience. Sensory forms of knowing are by nature more concrete and easier to agree upon than more

participatory, intuitive forms of knowing
(though they too are ultimately interpretive and fallible, as the history of science over the past few hundred years repeatedly demonstrates).

Having a plurality of religious and metaphysical frameworks for understanding the universal context is not that different from having a plurality of paradigms for understanding culture or individual personality in the social sciences. Theology, sociology, and personality theory in psychology all rely on participative forms of knowing. Thus all three endeavors have multiple paradigms for understanding their respective phenomena of interest. Just because different theological or religious

frameworks are more interpretive does not make them false or mythical, as conventional scientists have often argued. Freud and Jung had quite different interpretations of the dynamics of individual personality, but their disagreement did not render their interpretations false or mythical.

Conclusion

To conclude, spiritual inquiry, just like inquiry in the social sciences, refers to realities whose existence is “confirmed” through insight, intuition, and, in the case of the universal context, vision and revelation of so-called “subtle domains.” These domains are not in physical space; they are a part of consciousness

or what has been described here as the “interiority” of the Cosmos—the Cosmos “from the inside out.” Postmodern relativism would argue that religious and metaphysical conceptions are *merely* cultural constructions that do not point to any ultimate reality.

The position taken here is that *there is an underlying universal reality to which these various conceptions refer*. Most important, clues to this reality can be found in the *points of convergence and consensus* that exist across different religious and spiritual systems of understanding. For the individual, *personal truth* comes from whatever conceptions help one to better understand the spiritual dimension of experience and its

relevance to personal life. Yet this website makes the case that there is also a *universal truth* that can be revealed within points of consensus among the variety of attempts to understand the so-called universal context, *because reality itself has a unique spiritual face or aspect that lends itself to such understanding.*

While we are still a long way from a universal, consensual understanding of the universal context (a variety of theologies and religions are likely to be around for a long time), many more people embrace a universal spirituality (outside of any particular religion) now as compared with one hundred years ago. The long march toward a universal spirituality on planet Earth

has begun and likely will continue for a several more centuries before humans of different faiths and backgrounds may begin to embrace anything approximating a universal spirituality.