



A Visit to the Local God: Reclaiming the Diversity of the Divine

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I offer reflections on the barriers and bridges separating philosophy and religion, with a special focus on contemporary narratives regarding disenchantment and re-enchantment on the trajectory of so-called global modernity. Through the investigation, a uniquely politicized approach to the question of the “supernatural” in religious thought presents itself as at least one promising area of investigation for a “comparative philosophy of religion.” Here “supernatural” means “hypernatural,” which is to say, a special, heightened, or otherwise extra-ordinary development still rooted in the everyday natural world. A “politicized approach” to the supernatural means a theoretical and methodological framework that is cognizant of and responsive to the dynamics of social power under conditions of disparity. The path of the essay includes visits to several gods, spanning my time spent in Hawai‘i for graduate school, my current position teaching and researching in Chinese philosophy, and the still-jealous God of my Jewish childhood. In dialogue with several cosmological answers to religious questions of creation and existence, we seek narratives that accommodate religious diversity without falling back on Eurocentric theological models.

KEYWORDS

Chinese philosophy, colonialism, disenchantment, Hawaiian philosophy, Jewish theology, philosophy of religion, re-enchantment, religious pluralism

Having recently become involved in the “comparative philosophy of religion,”¹ I have begun to wonder what differentiates research in this field from that in general “comparative philosophy,” especially when speaking of Asian traditions. That is, what methodological or theoretical frames might meaningfully distinguish these two enterprises, given that the divide between “philosophy” and “religion” is already somewhat artificial in the East Asian context? In light of the theme of this special issue, I offer some thoughts here on the barriers and bridges separating research in these areas, with a special focus in how this topic relates to contemporary narratives regarding disenchantment and re-enchantment on the trajectory of so-called global modernity. As I propose in what follows, a uniquely politicized approach to the question of the supernatural in religious thought presents itself as at least one promising area of investigation in a “comparative philosophy of religion.”

Let me clarify at the outset my use of the terms “supernatural” and “politics” in this context. By “supernatural” I mean phenomena that may lie outside the perceptive capabilities of ordinary consciousness or that may defy reductive mechanistic or materialist explanations. Notably, I do not mean phenomena that lie outside the realm of the “natural.” I use “supernatural,” in this sense, to mean “hypernatural,” which is to say, a special, heightened, or otherwise extra-ordinary development still rooted in the everyday natural world. By “politics” I mean the shifting dynamics of social power, and by “politicized approach” to the supernatural, I mean a theoretical and methodological framework

that is cognizant of and responsive to such ongoing negotiations under conditions of disparity. In other words, a politicized framework remains aware that not all scholarly voices are equally situated within the neocolonial realities of contemporary academia, and, in response, it seeks liberatory

*Can we mold it? Can we make it one?
Can we, without prognosticating or
divining, know our fortunes and
misfortunes?
Can we halt? Can we stop?
Can we, without seeking from others,
obtain the self?
Contemplate it, contemplate it, again
repeatedly contemplate it.
We contemplate it but cannot reach it.
The ghosts and spirits that can reach
it—
Not because they are especially forceful,
but because the purest qi reaches
the farthest.**

能搏乎？能一乎？
能無卜筮而知吉凶乎？
能止乎？能已乎？
能勿求諸人而得之己乎？
思之思之，又重思之，思之而不通。
鬼神將通之，非鬼神之力也，精氣之
極也。

interventions in hegemonic practices.

One such unequally situated subject of discourse is precisely the question of the “supernatural.” Historically, as discussed

¹ These projects reflect the work of my colleagues Tim Knepper and Gereon Kopf and others involved with the Global-Critical Philosophy of Religion Seminar that recently concluded a five-year term at the American Academy of Religion. See Knepper, “How to Philosophize about Religion Globally and Critically . . . with Undergraduates”; Knepper and

Kalmanson, *Ineffability: An Exercise in Comparative Philosophy of Religion*.

* Dai Wang 戴望, comm., *Guanzi jiao zheng* 管子校正, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 271. Translated by Jennifer Liu with the help of Leah Kalmanson.

below, engagement with the supernatural has been associated with a cluster of negatively flavored concepts such as superstition, irrationality, and (depending on the religion) idolatry. Today, philosophers of religion tend to take the issue of the supernatural solely as a question of epistemology: Is “belief” in supernatural entities “justified”? In search of alternatives and liberatory interventions, I follow here a politicized approach—the journey includes visits to several gods, spanning my time spent in Hawai‘i for graduate school, my current position teaching and researching in Chinese philosophy, and the still-jealous God of my Jewish childhood. Throughout the journey, we find the so-called enchanted world fraught with political strife yet open to a sense of “wonder” made all the more vivid by its constitutive existential uncertainty.

The Politics of Disenchantment

Broadly speaking, the historical trajectory of “disenchantment” refers to the claim that, over the course of Europe’s modern period, a materialist and reductive scientific worldview took hold and erased so-called supernatural phenomena from the realm of plausibility. Accordingly, religion became disentangled from politics in the public sphere and relegated to the status of private belief. The upside (according to some) was the rapid advancement of science and technology and the spread of liberal democracy, while at least one downside was the loss of a certain sense of “wonder” regarding the mysteries of the world around us.

I am interested here in the political downsides of disenchantment, evident in the intimate

collusion between science, religion, and colonialism in European history. As Jason Josephson-Storm has discussed, the word “religion” travels across cultures not alone but as part of a larger conceptual apparatus that includes religion, secularism, and superstition. On this model, the often under-theorized category of “superstition” serves to police the boundaries of both religion “proper” and the assumed rational character of secular, scientific inquiry.² Accordingly, a central point of tension is made visible when we broach the question of what differentiates the “superstitious” from the “properly” religious.

The word “religion” derives from a Latin root (*religio*), whose precise origin is unclear. In his studies of the translation of “religion” into Japanese, Josephson-Storm says: “Regardless of its origins, in pre-Christian Roman usage, *religio* generally referred to a prohibition or an obligation.”³ By the fifteenth century, *religio* was used in Catholicism to refer to “the performance of ritual obligations, especially . . . to describe a state of life bound by monastic vows”; and, accordingly, “the noun ‘the religious’ referred to monks and nuns.”⁴ Strictly speaking, these terms are specific to European intellectual history; or, as Robert Ford Company says: “Discourse about religions is rooted in Western language communities and in the history of Western cultures. . . . To speak of ‘religions’ is to demarcate things in ways that are not inevitable or immutable but, rather, are contingent on the shape of Western history, thought, and institutions. Other cultures may, and do, lack closely equivalent demarcations.”⁵ By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European scholars had developed a specific way to “demarcate things”

² Josephson-Storm, “The Superstition, Secularism, and Religion Trinary.”

³ Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, 17. Note, the name under which this author publishes has

changed, and I cite his work accordingly in the notes and references.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵ Company, “On the Very Idea of Religions (in the Modern West and in Early Medieval China),” 289.

within a hierarchical schema that tended to include, according to Tomoko Masuzawa's analysis, Christianity as the only true religion, Judaism and Islam as "almost Christian, or at least would-be Christians," and a multitude of so-called idolators or heathens who did not possess proper religion at all.⁶

In this context, European colonization was framed as a civilizing mission, which involved bestowing a key civilizational marker—i.e., proper religion—to those portrayed as languishing in the uncivilized fog of superstition and idolatry. So, when deployed as a vehicle for colonization, the rational and universal aspects of religion are emphasized. From this perspective, the one true religion—Christianity—is opposed to the superstitions of "paganism." The former is portrayed as a friend to science, progress, and other Enlightenment values; while the latter is depicted as backward, irrational, and even dangerous.

However, in the fraught history of the Enlightenment in Europe, religions in general, including Christianity, were often cast as superstitious modes of thinking in contrast to the rationality of science, philosophy, and secular humanism. This helps explain G. W. F. Hegel's comment, in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, that what "we call Eastern Philosophy is more properly the religious mode of thought."⁷ Thus, he counts it as pre-philosophical and includes a discussion of it only to illustrate its difference from the "true Philosophy" that develops later in Greece.⁸ As this all shows, "philosophy" as a discipline has been caught up in the same conceptual web expressed by Josephson-Storm's trinary model of superstition, secularism, and religion.

The overall trajectory of this intellectual history reveals Europe's self-narration of its so-called progress toward humanistic secularism, where religion is not erased but often politely ignored as a vestige of more naïve times. On the one hand, in terms of dynamics internal to Europe, we might say that this turn toward secularism is an antidote to the hegemony of Christian universalism. In other words, by creating a secular public sphere and relegating religion to the realm of the private, we place a check on Christianity's collusion with colonial expansion. On the other hand, secularism itself becomes the vehicle for European cultural chauvinism on the world stage. The condescending attitude that Christianity once postured toward so-called idolators is simply extended to include all religions, placing agnosticism in general on the side of reason and science and leaving any "believers" to make peace privately with their various spiritual commitments.

The Politics of Re-Enchantment

Again, in terms of dynamics internal to European and "Western" thought broadly, some recent scholars have questioned what we lose when we allow scientific materialism and secular humanism to become the dominant paradigms. The possibility for "re-enchantment" marks trends in scholarship from speculative realism and object-oriented ontology to panpsychism and new animism. Overall such trends are driven by the perceived intractability of the dualistic legacy of European modernity in its approach to questions of spirit, mind, and matter.

For example, Quentin Meillassoux, in his work on speculative realism, has associated the phenomenological approach to overcoming dualism with what he calls the

⁶ Masuzawa, *The Invention World Religions*, 49.

⁷ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 117

⁸ Ibid.

problem of “correlationism.” In short, as the argument goes, since at least the time of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and his distinction between noumena and phenomena, philosophers have accepted the thesis that our understanding of reality is correlated with our capacity for understanding, that is, with our own perceptual and cognitive abilities and limitations. Meillassoux makes the even stronger claim that philosophers (especially phenomenologists) correlate being, or existence itself, with the experience of being, which produces what “could be called a ‘species solipsism’, or a ‘solipsism of the community’, since it ratifies the impossibility of thinking any reality that would be anterior or posterior to the community of thinking beings.”⁹ As a result, we lose access to the “great outdoors” which is to say, we lose the ability to make sense of mind-independent reality.¹⁰ Here, Meillassoux’s speculative realism calls for a renewed investigation into the great outdoors—i.e., speculation—without returning to the assumptions of a naïve realism in which we simply have unimpeded access to what we know and perceive.

Such speculative trends have led to a renewed interest in panpsychism as a philosophical position. As Steven Shaviro says, in *The Universe of Things*, “When we step outside of the correlationist circle, we are faced with a choice between panpsychism on the one hand or eliminativism on the other.”¹¹ That is, either we accept the nihilistic elimination of all the qualities that the mind apparently endows on experience (values, morals, meaning, and so forth), or instead we challenge the presumed dualism between the psychical and physical. Shaviro, for his part, sides with panpsychism and argues convincingly that many of the speculative realists’ concerns can be addressed

through the existing philosophies of A. N. Whitehead (1861–1947) and William James (1842–1910).¹² Shaviro’s openness to panpsychism is echoed by others in the related fields of object-oriented ontology and so-called new materialisms. For example, Jane Bennett proposes the theory of “vital materiality” as a direct antidote to the disenchanting view that matter is supposedly inert and thus fundamentally devoid of the agentic vitality that marks biological and sentient life. She suggests that we might hesitantly indulge in anthropomorphism—that is, to allow ourselves to believe in the sentience of material things—as a way to overcome the old habits of modernity and its dualisms.¹³

Although I am interested in these trends toward panpsychism and animism, I have concerns about how the philosophical details are enumerated, not necessarily in a technical philosophy such as Whitehead’s but in applied fields such as environmentalism, deep ecology, and ecofeminism. Consider, for example, the environmental philosopher Freya Mathews and her influential 2003 work *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism*. She takes the nondualist implications of panpsychism to indicate that “the universe may be conceived as a unified, though internally differentiated and dynamic, expanding plenum” that is “necessarily self-actualizing.”¹⁴ As such, it is a “cosmic self” or unified field of subjectivity that is “logically prior” to individuated entities, much like primary qualities are logically prior to secondary ones.¹⁵ She explains: “For under its extensional aspect, the universe is differentiated into local modes, some of which may be capable of experiencing themselves as relatively distinct unities, or centers of

⁹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 50.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 83.

¹² *Ibid.*, 78.

¹³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 120

¹⁴ Mathews, *For Love of Matter*, 47.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48

subjectivity, separated out from the greater whole.”¹⁶ These “secondary subjects” can be viewed as “distinct individuals, even while it is understood that such individuals are still ultimately continuous with the primal, indivisible whole.”¹⁷

She further explains the self-interest of secondary subjects on a model of ecological balance, claiming that “True, inter-species relations are typically, in undisturbed ecosystems, mutually sustaining at the level of populations. . . . Predation and parasitism are thus, in intact ecosystems, generally finely tuned forms of environmental ‘management.’”¹⁸ She then extends this thesis in comparative terms: “Such a happy prearranged, basically ecological harmony between the desires of the Many and those of the One may be taken to constitute what might be called, after the Chinese notion of the Tao, the ‘Way’ of the One and the Many.”¹⁹ I will return later to the ways that Chinese philosophy may complicate this picture. Before that, I want to explore the implications of rendering all entities as secondary qualities of a primary whole, especially as this is offered to us as one trajectory toward so-called re-enchancement. Note that Mathews’s above approach to the supernatural is markedly *depoliticized*: all apparent power imbalances, such as that between predator and prey or parasite and host, are in fact harmonious when viewed from the larger perspective of the cosmic self. It is precisely this “happy prearrangement” of harmony via holistic

panpsychism that I am prompted to question within a more politicized framework.

A Visit to the Local Gods

My reflections center on an example from the Hawaiian tradition. I spent eight years in Honolulu as a graduate student in the philosophy department at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. As a transplant from the state of Georgia, I had relocated from the crucible of the racially divided South, where I grew up, to the vividly neocolonial reality of present-day Hawai‘i. The example I relate here concerns a specific interaction between university scientists, local farmers, political activists, and others over the patenting of a strain of taro plant, or, in the Hawaiian language, *kalo*.

In Hawaiian cosmology, genealogy connects the indigenous people (Kānaka Maoli or ‘Ōiwi Maoli²⁰) to the land, as documented in records such as the Kumulipo and others.²¹ The historian Lilikalā Kame‘eleihiwa recounts the lineage of Wākea and Papa, the “sky-father” and “earth-mother,” who birthed the islands of Hawai‘i and Maui as well as a human child: “According to tradition, their first human offspring was a daughter, Ho‘ohōkūkalanī (to generate stars in the sky), who matured into a great beauty.”²² As a result, “a desire for his daughter welled up in Wākea, but he hoped to gratify his desire without his sister and *wahine* (woman, or wife) knowing of it.”²³ Nonetheless Ho‘ohōkūkalanī eventually told her mother of the affair, prompting Papa to

¹⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹⁷ Ibid., 50.

¹⁸ Ibid., 57.

¹⁹ Ibid., 64.

²⁰ The latter, less commonly used term is suggested by Kanalu Young in *Rethinking the Native Hawaiian Past*, xi. It is the term used by Julia Morgan in her research on the *kalo* patents, which I cite below.

²¹ I follow McDougall, “Mo‘okū‘auhua versus Colonial Entitlement in English Translations of the Kumulipo,” in not italicizing this title (777, n.1); and Teves, “We’re All Hawaiians Now,” in not italicizing other Hawaiian terms (such as *kalo*) (2, n.4).

²² Kame‘eleihiwa, *Native Land and Foreign Desires* (digital edition), Chapter 2, section “Wākea and Papa: The Beginning of Hawaiian Time.”

²³ Ibid.

leave Wākea in anger for other lovers (although Papa later reconciled with him to bear the islands of Kaua‘i, Ni‘ihau, Lehua, and Ka‘ula). But it is from the affair of Wākea and Ho‘ohōkūkalanī that the Hawaiian people descend:

The first child of Wākea and Ho‘ohōkūkalanī was an unformed foetus, born prematurely; they named him Hāloa-naka (quivering long stalk). They buried Hāloa-naka in the earth, and from that spot grew the first *kalo* plant. The second child, named Hāloa in honor of his elder brother, was the first Hawaiian *Ali‘i Nui* and became the ancestor of all the Hawaiian people. Thus the *kalo* plant, which was the main staple of the people of old, is also the elder brother of the Hawaiian race, and as such deserves great respect.²⁴

To this day, *kalo* remains central in many aspects of Hawaiian thought and practice. It is also an important crop in Hawai‘i both for local consumption and for export.

However, in recent decades, so-called modern farming methods have moved away from traditional practices that once preserved the genetic diversity of numerous *kalo* varieties, resulting in plants now vulnerable to a type of blight. In the early 2000s, researchers at the University of Hawai‘i produced genetically modified strains resistant to the blight and, as is common practice, patented them. In response to a 2002 legal dispute over the status of these patented strains, one local farmer rejected the university’s right to ownership, because “(f)rom a Hawaiian perspective, any *kalo* is our ancestor.”²⁵

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Jacobs, “Kalo is More Than a Native Hawaiian Plant.”

²⁶ Ibid.

In a statement intended to acquiesce to Kānaka Maoli concerns, the university’s Vice Chancellor for Research and Graduate Education, Gary K. Ostrander, said: “Taro is unique to the Hawaiian people in that it represents the embodiment of their sacred ancestor. As such, it is appropriate to make an exception to our standard policy of holding all patents.”²⁶ Here, in Ostrander’s statement, we see a version of a narrative of “disenchantment.” The Kānaka Maoli recognize, contend with, and adjudicate on behalf of their living ancestor the *kalo*, whereas Ostrander portrays the *kalo* as a symbolic representation of the sacred. But, as Julia Morgan makes clear in her study of these legal disputes, Kānaka Maoli did not oppose the patent because the *kalo* symbolizes a Hawaiian ancestor, or because it is a metaphor for Hawaiian heritage, or according to any other description that might downplay the agency of the *kalo* itself in this argument: “Simply, ‘Ōiwi Maoli opposed the patents because a relative cannot be owned.”²⁷

How are we to address this mismatch of worldviews? If we restrict our discourse to exclude the supernatural altogether—i.e., the fully “disenchanted” view—then we simply fail to take the Kānaka Maoli perspective seriously, at least not on this issue. However, so far, our only option for “re-enchantment” has been an inclusive panpsychism. If we consider the supernatural generically, in the sense of general spiritual-material non-dualism, then we render Hāloa one specific manifestation, as it were, of “something greater,” perhaps a greater “cosmic self.” But then we lose the specificity of Hawaiian cosmology and cosmogony. We lose the sense in which Hāloa is an elder brother within one

²⁷ Morgan, “Mālama ‘Āina, Kalo, and Ho‘opili: Growing a Third-Way Environmental Relationship,” 231.

particular family.²⁸ We miss the entire point, as it were, of the genealogical narrative.

I suggest that, for philosophers to avoid either condescending toward the Hawaiians or subsuming Hawaiian cosmology within a general spiritual holism, they must make the specificity and locality of the supernatural visible as a subject of philosophical discussion. This, I take it, is one topic that might fall under the purview of a comparative philosophy of religion.

On that note, it bears pointing out that Wākea and Papa appear midway in the full Hawaiian genealogical cosmogony. They may be the ancestors of the Kānaka Maoli, but they are preceded by a lineage of powerful entities extending back into the distant past. There are divergent accounts, but at least some cosmogonies hold that the first such powers emerged from a primordial chaos through their own dynamism.²⁹ An early English version of the Kumulipo was translated by Queen Lili‘uokalani (1838–1917) during her imprisonment at Iolani Palace prior to her forced abdication to American rule. In her rendition, the first verse begins:

At the time that turned the heat of the earth,
 At the time when the heavens turned and
 changed,
 At the time when the light of the sun was
 subdued
 To cause light to break forth,
 At the time of the night of Makalii (winter)
 Then began the slime which established
 the earth,

²⁸ For an extended study of the issues of indigeneity, diversity, and multiculturalism in the Hawaiian context, see Teves, “We’re All Hawaiians Now: Kanaka Maoli Performance and the Politics of Aloha.”

²⁹ For an in-depth study, see Warren, “Theorizing Pō: Embodied Cosmogony and Polynesian National Narratives.” See also Dorothy B. Barrère, “Cosmogonic Genealogies of Hawaii.”

The source of deepest darkness.³⁰

Contemporary commentator Jordan Kalani Harden contrasts this genealogical narrative with “monotheistic theories of creationism,” noting that the “[Kumulipo] cosmogony does not explain the creation of these ‘heavens,’ nor that of the planets that it subsequently mentions.”³¹ Instead, the text emphasizes “a generative spirit, or element, as the primary source of creation.”³² As the Kumulipo continues, from this generative force comes the “slime” that establishes the earth, then the night, and then, in the second verse, two gendered entities:

Kumulipo was born in the night, a male.
 Poele was born in the night, a female.³³

Jordan characterizes these not as personified deities but “generative, cosmological energies.”³⁴ Following these, the text begins a lengthy genealogy of plants and animals:

A coral insect was born, from which was
 born perforated coral.
 The earth worm was born, which gathered
 earth into mounds.³⁵

Jordan notes the ontological parity of all such phenomena to emerge through the generative energies of the early cosmos: “this designation places various creations as equal to one another, each emerging from the same

³⁰ Lili‘uokalani, trans., *The Kumulipo*, 1.

³¹ Harden, “Understanding Native Hawaiian Land Relations through Kānaka Maoli Literature,” 27.

³² *Ibid.*, 27–28.

³³ Lili‘uokalani, trans., *The Kumulipo*, 2.

³⁴ Harden, “Understanding Native Hawaiian Land Relations through Kānaka Maoli Literature,” 28.

³⁵ Lili‘uokalani, trans., *The Kumulipo*, 2.

generative source, and none marked as favored by its creator.”³⁶

Again, thinking through the work of a possible comparative philosophy of religion, we can make the initial observation that some cosmogonic narratives allow for radical diversity or even incommensurability across different phenomena and systems; while others, by various means, reduce diversity to sameness. Consider three options:

(1) We might begin with the familiar Aristotelian-flavored monotheistic theologies of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, which hold that a necessary, independent, and self-caused supreme being must be responsible for the existence of creation. We can call this a cosmogonic narrative of “transcendence.”

(2) We might next return to the position of panpsychism mentioned earlier, which rejects the apparent divide between the transcendent and the immanent, the spiritual and the material, mind and matter. In this position’s overt emphasis on overcoming dualisms, we earlier saw a tendency toward holism, rendering individually existing things as manifestations of an underlying reality or avatars of a greater whole. The cosmogonic narrative that corresponds to this holistic interpretation of panpsychism can be called one of “manifestation.”

(3) Finally, we can consider the cosmogonic narrative of “emergence,” in which existence as we know it emerges through its own dynamism or produces emergent phenomena through various generative processes. This allows for the possibility that structured existence emerges from chaos, that being emerges

from non-being, or that some manner of existence has simply always existed, in various states of organization and dissolution.

We will turn to some of the options under the third narrative in the next section. For now, note simply that the narrative of emergence is the one best suited to account for what we might call, in today’s language, “religious diversity,” especially if we mean a narrative that can engage Kānaka Maoli cosmogony. In the first case, the narrative of transcendence tends to accord to itself an absolute sense of truth, and hence is less able to tolerate competing narrative models. In the second case, the narrative of manifestation, although egalitarian at first glance, renders all “local deities” as various manifestations or avatars of a greater whole, or holds that some underlying generic reality has manifested in a specific form, and thus ultimately it inscribes otherness as sameness.

But an emergent deity is truly a unique production. It is its own force to be reckoned with, on its own terms. Unlike those who are all brothers in Christ, we are *not* all brothers with Hāloa. And unlike those who claim oneness with the cosmic self, we are *not* all one with Hāloa. When I lived in Hawai‘i I was, at best, a *guest* in Hāloa’s house. But I could claim no direct kinship, neither through narratives of transcendence nor of manifestation. My relationship with Hāloa was, in short, not religious but political. As I propose here, the narrative of emergence retains the political dimension of the supernatural, where unequally situated forces engage each other in conditions of uncertainty and under the weight of real consequences.

³⁶ Harden, “Understanding Native Hawaiian Land Relations through Kānaka Maoli Literature,” 27.

The Politics of Cosmogonic Emergence in Chinese Thought

We turn now to various versions of emergent cosmogonies in Chinese thought, with an eye toward the political disagreements that underly seemingly obscure cosmological or metaphysical points. In line with my continuing theme, I suggest that it is because Chinese theories overall privilege emergentist narratives that the political dimensions remain front and center.

One of the most well-known Chinese accounts of spontaneous cosmic emergence comes from the 25th chapter of the *Laozi* 老子 (or *Daodejing* 道德經), where we are told that something unformed (*hun* 混) yet complete (*cheng* 成) emerged (*sheng* 生) before the cosmos and the earth.³⁷ The text asserts that it is the mother of all things and calls it “way” or “way-making” (*dao* 道). Humans follow the way of the earth, the earth follows the cosmos, and the cosmos follows *dao*. But what does *dao* follow? Chapter 25 tells us only that *dao* is “spontaneously so” (*ziran* 自然).³⁸ Chapter 4 informs us that it existed even before the gods (*di* 帝).

Most Chinese cosmogonic narratives follow a similar pattern: First there comes a primal state described variously as formless, undifferentiated, chaotic, or void; next there spontaneously emerges the initial distinction into the polar forces of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽; and

then, from the increasingly complex interactions of *yin* and *yang* arise the myriad things of the cosmos as we know it. In other words, the polarity quickly becomes a multiplicity due to the recursive behavior of these generative forces by which newly emergent phenomena interact with existing phenomena in layers of escalating complexity. Continuing in the *Laozi*, chapter 42 recounts this cosmogonic progression succinctly: “*Dao* births one, one births two, two birth three, and three birth the myriad things” 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物. The “one” here could be associated with a term *taiyi* 太一 or “Supreme Unity,” which was personified and worshipped as a divinity in the Warring States period and Han dynasty.³⁹ It could also be associated with “primal *qi*” (*yuanqi* 元氣), an undifferentiated state of the primordial material that differentiates and develops to give rise to existence as we know it. The central term *qi* has been translated into English variously as “vital stuff,” “psychophysical stuff,” and “lively material.”⁴⁰ It is the matter–energy matrix that accounts for all that exists, whether we mean what is condensed and palpable, as in physical objects, or what is dispersed and ethereal, as in the mental energies of human thoughts and feelings. In most Chinese cosmogonies, the behavioral tendencies of *qi* play a crucial role.

The “two” of chapter 42 refers to the polar forces of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽, where *yin* refers to forces that settle and sink, that are dark and heavy, and that tend to condense; and *yang*

³⁷ My translations from the *Daodejing* at Chinese Text Project online database, which I refer to for several primary sources throughout the essay. Developed by Donald Sturgeon, this open-access library is the largest online repository of classical and literary Chinese-language texts and is cross-referenced with multiple established concordances (<https://ctext.org/tools/concordance>). That said, the *Chinese Text Project* would not be the first choice for sinologists or others engaged in advanced philological

or linguistic work, who would choose to cite a concordance directly. For my purposes here, the Chinese Text Project suffices to provide access to primary sources.

³⁸ For this turn of phrase, see the translation by Ames and Hall.

³⁹ Puett, *To Become a God*, 160–62.

⁴⁰ E.g., Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism*; Gardner, *Learning to Be a Sage*; Ivanhoe, *Three Streams*.

refers to forces that rise or flow, that are clear and light, and that tend to disperse. No single phenomenon is *yin* or *yang* on its own but only in relation to other phenomena in specific contexts. This accounts for the so-called correlative cosmology often associated with Chinese philosophical and metaphysical theories.⁴¹

We should pause here to note that it would be awkward to describe *yin* and *yang* as “manifestations” of primal *qi*. The primal *qi* is, in one way or another, altered by the emergence of this polarity. Some strands of Chinese thought portray this as a transition from chaos to structure, while others portray it as the disturbance of a once-pristine tranquility. But, either way, the emergence of the *yinyang* polarity marks the onset of new conditions, not the manifestation of generic primal *qi* into two specific forms. We cannot capture the relation of *yuanqi* to *yin* and *yang* through a logic of either genus and species or primary and secondary qualities.



Continuing along the emergent cosmogonic narrative, there is usually at least one intermediary stage named between *yin* and *yang* and the “myriad things,” or the diverse reality that we inhabit. In chapter 42, the intermediary “three” is likely a reference to the trinary relation of cosmos (*tian* 天), earth (*di* 地), and humans (*ren* 人), whose proper alignment was seen as central to attaining and

maintaining cosmic harmony. In other areas, such as medicine or agriculture, texts might refer instead to the transition from *yinyang* to the five phases (*wuxing* 五行) of water, fire, wood, metal, and earth, which constitute a schematic according to which certain correspondences can be mapped between phenomena of similar structures or constitutions in what has been described as “correlative thinking.”⁴²

Another cosmogonic narrative is found in the *Yijing* 易經 or *Book of Changes*, one of China’s traditional Five Classics, which gives us yet another take on the source of emergent phenomena and the intermediary stage between polarity and multiplicity. This text has been more influential in China’s dominant tradition of “Confucianism” or, to use the alternative word I prefer, Ruism. The latter reflects Chinese names for this tradition, such as *rujia* 儒家 (“scholarly lineage”) and *ruxue* 儒學 (“scholarly study”). Compared to Daoism and Buddhism, perhaps Ruism is the most difficult to categorize in terms of either “philosophy” or “religion.”

As stated in an early companion commentary to the *Yijing*, the text is a vehicle for the same primal cosmological progression that birthed the universe:

The *Book of Changes* contains the Great Ultimate; the Great Ultimate brings forth the two polar forces; the two polar forces bring forth the four images; and the four images bring forth the eight trigrams. These eight establish good fortune and misfortune. From fortune and misfortune come forth the great affairs [of life].”

⁴¹ Puett, *To Become a God*, 146.

⁴² See *ibid.*, especially the fourth chapter, for a discussion of the history of the use of this term by

scholars such as Marcel Granet and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

是故，易有太極，是生兩儀，兩儀生四象，四象生八卦，八卦定吉凶，吉凶生大業。⁴³

Despite a common cosmological pattern across the *Laozi* and *Yijing*—from one, to two, to the myriad things—later Ruist and Daoist interpreters disagreed about the details. And, although it is not always immediately evident to readers today, these disagreements often had a political dimension.

In particular, in the Song dynasty (960–1279), as part of what is called in English “Neo-Confucianism,” Ruists launched critiques claiming that Buddhism’s philosophical emphasis on emptiness fostered quietism, emotional detachment, nihilism, and moral relativism. Often these critiques were extended to Daoist thought, as well, which even since the early days of the reception of the dharma in China had been seen as similar to Buddhism. Like Buddhism, Daoism emphasizes the relativity of certain values and social norms, criticizes greed and desire, advocates for a measure of detachment from life’s vicissitudes, and, relevant to our discussion here, speaks of *dao* as vacuous (*xu* 虛) or empty (*wu* 無) (e.g., chapters 5, 11, and 42, among others). Often Daoist vocabulary was enlisted to translate Sanskrit terms such as *śūnatā* or “emptiness” over the course of the reception of Buddhism in China.

However, contemporary scholar JeeLoo Liu asserts that “in both classical Daoist and Neo-Confucian conceptions, there was no primordial absolute nothingness,”⁴⁴ meaning

that overt theorizing about nothingness or emptiness was a contribution of Buddhist sources in particular. Liu provides strong textual and etymological evidence to show that, in early Daoist texts, apparent references to nothingness or emptiness are in fact references to formlessness, which is to say, primordial formless *qi*. As a result, she asserts, both early Ruists and early Daoists share the same basic *qi*-based cosmology in which utter nothingness is not a plausible metaphysical possibility. Accordingly, she argues that many Song-era Ruist critics of Daoism were often making a political or moral point about Daoist passivity; that is, they were mostly worried about the perceived abnegation of social responsibilities, not the status of nothingness in a metaphysical theory.

In particular, debates arose in the Song over the nature of the “Great Ultimate” (*taiji* 太極), mentioned in the *Yijing* passage quoted above, as interpreted by Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073), a Ruist thinker deeply engaged with both Daoist and Buddhist sources. As Liu discusses, Zhou’s prominent use of the Daoist term *wuji* 無極 in his cosmological theories sets off many later debates over the question of emptiness and its role in Ruist thought.⁴⁵ The first character 無 (*wu*) can mean “empty of” or “lacking,” and we saw it earlier associated with the Daoist idea of voidness. The second character 極 (*ji*) means “ultimate,” “extreme,” or “utmost.” In Zhou’s explanation of the diagram of the Great Ultimate (*taijitu* 太極圖), he begins with the ambiguous inscription *wuji er taiji* 無極而太極, which might be read as “*wuji* then *taiji*” or “*wuji* and also *taiji*.”⁴⁶

⁴³ My translation from the *Yijing*, *Xici shang* 繫辭上, 11, at *Chinese Text Project* online database. The “four images” refer to four possible pairings of *yin* and *yang*.

⁴⁴ Liu, “Was There Something in Nothingness?” 181.

⁴⁵ Liu, *Neo-Confucianism*, 32.

⁴⁶ See Liu, *Neo-Confucianism*, 29–33, for discussion of the history of this text and the phrase in question. I also consulted Wang, “Zhou Dunyi’s Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate Explained (“Taijitu Shuo”): A Construction of the Confucian Metaphysics,” 310, for the diagram and original inscription, and 314–315 for Wang’s full translation of Zhou’s explanation.

Every aspect of the phrase presents difficulties. Does *wuji* mean “no-ultimate”? Does it mean “ultimate of non-being,” as it is often rendered in English? Or does it mean, instead, “limitless,” or that “utmost extreme” beyond which there is nothing greater? All such possibilities are present in the Chinese. As such, the phrase as a whole might mean that before the “great ultimate” there was “no ultimate”—perhaps there was nothing at all. It might mean that the “ultimate of non-being” is also the “great ultimate.” Or, it might mean, in quite a different sense, that the “ultimate” is limitless and also great.

Some interpretations of Zhou’s wording would paint him as a quasi-nihilist and deserter to Daoism, especially those which posit nonbeing as the origin of the Great Ultimate. A more Ruist interpretation would suggest, instead, that the Great Ultimate is to be understood as limitless or indescribable. Liu provides detailed research and argumentation to show that, according to most Ruist understandings, *taiji* refers to the primordial formless *qi* out of which *yin* and *yang* spontaneously differentiate themselves.⁴⁷ As she concludes, this amounts to a strong rejection of what we would call in European terms creation *ex nihilo* or the idea that something can ever come from nothing.⁴⁸ The Ruist view situates us within a cosmology in which sheer voidness is simply not metaphysically plausible—as Liu sums up, there has always been “something,” and this something is *qi*.⁴⁹

In other works, Liu refers to this as a “*qi*-realism” in which *qi* “constitutes everything and is responsible for all changes.”⁵⁰ Here, I suggest that the *qi*-realistic framework

amounts to a strong version of an emergent cosmogonic narrative. The focus is not on the origin of the *qi*-matrix itself, which would draw us toward narratives of either transcendence or manifestation; rather, the focus remains on the spontaneous emergence of a diversity of forms out of formlessness, where formlessness is neither ontologically foundational nor metaphysically transcendent. Again, the difference is political.

For example, the historian Tze-Ki Hon identifies competing cosmogonic narratives as central drivers of social and political reform in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). One contributor to these reforms was the semi-hermit and later famed educator Hu Yuan 胡瑗 (993–1059). In Hu’s commentary on the *Yijing*, he boldly overturned the positions of several then-dominant commentaries that, as he argued, were unduly influenced by Daoist notions of voidness (*wu* 無), tended to overly romanticize hermits, and adopted a fatalistic attitude toward inevitable political unrest. These included the commentaries of Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) and Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648).⁵¹ Responding to the issue of voidness, Hu rejected the notion that primal *qi* had emerged from an even more primal void, insisting there is always some state of *qi*, either “lacking-form” (*wuxing* 無形) or “having-forms” (*youxing* 有形).⁵² But, as Hon explains, this seemingly obscure metaphysical point was indeed an act of political resistance:

Whereas Kong Yingda’s [much earlier] reading of the *Yijing* tended to support the absolute power of the king, underlying Hu Yuan’s reading was his belief in human activism, directed broadly to all individuals. . . . He also believed that, as

⁴⁷ Liu, *Neo-Confucianism*, 51–58.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵⁰ Liu, “The Is-Ought Correlation in Neo-Confucian *Qi*-Realism,” 62.

⁵¹ See Hon, *The Yijing and Chinese Politics*, especially the second chapter.

⁵² Hon, *The Yijing and Chinese Politics*, 55.

part of the universe, human beings were already fulfilling their cosmic mission by improving their social and political order. For him, since the universe is actively renewing itself with the interaction of the *yin* and the *yang*, human beings should also be actively renewing themselves in matters big and small.⁵³

For Hu, the correct understanding of *wu* as *wuxing* returns emphasis to the concrete meaningfulness of the affairs of his day, making political progress itself a function, and appropriate goal, of spiritual self-cultivation.

This was, of course, one of the central tenets of the Ruist critique of Buddhism in the Song—i.e., the claim that the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness encouraged political passivity and overall inaction. Hon’s comment that “the universe is actively renewing itself” refers to the idea that primordial undifferentiated *qi* is neither ontologically nor metaphysically distant, but rather it is a force or potency that remains with us in the present. In other words, all existing forms emerge (*sheng* 生) from undifferentiated *qi*, whether we are speaking of the first forms at the inception of the cosmos or the myriad forms around us now that continue to live out, in the present, ongoing processes of arising, persistence, and eventual disintegration. And, under the right conditions, this primordial *qi* is available to us as a raw material, as it were, from which we can shape new forms, events, or processes. The ability to draw on this primal material is often portrayed as revitalizing, refreshing, and healthy.

Methods for “actively renewing” ourselves included, for the Song-era civil bureaucrats, certain meditative techniques such as “quiet sitting” (*jingzuo* 靜坐) that were influenced in part by the Chan Buddhist practice of seated

meditation (*zuochan* 坐禪). Although superficially similar, the Ruist focus on relaxing the heart-mind into its primordial formless state, for the sake of reinvigorating the mind’s own productive and creative powers, was quite at odds with Buddhist practice and its emphasis on realizing the correct understanding of emptiness and impermanence. Again, the difference, at least for the Ruists, was political. Going back to a foundational text such as the *Daxue* 大學 or *Great Learning*, we know that the well-cultivated heart-mind is the key to unlocking a potent chain of events, leading to stability at home, order in the state, and indeed peace throughout the whole world. The Ruists could experience for themselves the invigorating effects of quiet-sitting, the so-called method of “reverence” or “reflection” (*jing* 敬), textual recitation, and other Ruist contemplation and cultivation practices aimed at daily renewal (*rixin* 日新) and ceaseless vitality (*shengsheng buxi* 生生不息). Surely, it was this direct experience of the mind’s capacity for ever-vital transformation and renewal that led so many Ruists to see their cosmogony as the life-affirming counterpoint to what they portrayed as the enervating emptiness of the Buddhist and Daoist paths.

The Buddhists had their own responses to these charges, of course, and a full review of Buddhist–Ruist comparative thought is beyond the scope of this essay. I want to focus here on one final observation from Hon regarding the stakes of Hu Yuan’s disagreement with the earlier *Yijing* commentator Kong Yingda. In two cases, Hu’s objections seem aimed at readings of primal voidness that border on either transcendence or manifestation models. Firstly, as noted above, Kong was amenable a Daoist reading of the *Yijing*, in that he saw the text as concerning

⁵³ Ibid., 58–9.

the interplay between existing things-events (*you* 有) and primal voidness (*wu* 無). In particular, he was open to the claim that *you* and *wu* mark, in Hon's words, "two levels of existence," where "beyond the discrete objects of the phenomenal world, there is a totality that binds everything together."⁵⁴ Although I hesitate to read the language of "transcendence" too neatly into the Chinese context, Kong's interpretations, at least, invite such a comparison. Secondly, Kong was open to the reading "that *wu*, the totality of the universe, is not only omnipresent, but also takes different (sometimes even contradictory) forms to make its presence known."⁵⁵ Again, a comparison to a "manifestation" model seems warranted.

Hu Yuan resists both readings, and, as such, he aligns with what I described above as a strong emergentist position. His interpretation of *wu* as *wuxing* retains emphasis on the potency of *qi* and the forces of *yin* and *yang*, without speculating on what came before or lies outside the generative *qi*-matrix. Hon concludes:

The significance of Hu's position regarding the meaning of *yi* [易, i.e., in the *Yijing* 易經] lay not so much in its novelty, but in the way it challenged Kong's plea for a reversal from discrete phenomenal objects (*you*) to the web of relationships that joined everything together in this universe (*wu*). By arguing that *yi* meant changes alone, Hu treated phenomenal affairs as ontologically real, and thereby significant in their own right.⁵⁶

In the language we have been developing here, we might say that the ontological reality of phenomenal affairs is one hallmark of an emergent cosmogony in general. In other words, this cosmogonic narrative speaks to the

emergence of truly diverse phenomena, neither the manifestation of specific forms from a generic ontological substratum nor the reliance of the immanent world on a transcendent source. Arguably, this point holds whether we are talking about the spontaneous emergence of form from formless *qi*, or the possible emergence of the *qi*-matrix itself from a more primal void. Perhaps, in his attempt to discount the latter option through his strong emergentist position, Hu is guarding against any interpretation that diminishes the complexity and real diversity of contemporaneous affairs.

As we see, in this brief tour of Chinese cosmogonic debates, questions that vex cosmological and metaphysical investigation in European philosophy or religion are notably absent, such as questions of intentional design, divine attributes, the status of miracles, or the problem of evil. Rather, the debates center on moral and political issues: Does Buddhist emptiness lead to nihilism? Does Daoist voidness lead to political pacifism and moral relativism? The Ruists, like good critical theorists today, built socio-political analysis into their speculative philosophy.

Initial Conclusions: Cosmogonic Emergence, Science, Religion, and "Enchantment"

Scientific naturalism holds that consciousness is an "emergent phenomenon," which is to say, that it is not a separate spiritual or supernatural substance but rather a capacity for awareness arising from the configuration of flesh, blood, electrical synapses, hormones, and so forth, that characterize our material bodies and brains. This emergentist model is a hallmark of the so-called disenchanting worldview. How, then, does our discussion of cosmogonic emergence above contribute, as I suggested, to

⁵⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 53.

a philosophical position that takes seriously the specificity and locality of the supernatural?

The practices of “daily renewal” mentioned earlier rest upon the idea that the heart-mind can be clear and bright or cloudy and agitated, depending on its state of cultivation. This takes us to a central assumption on the part of Song philosophers, namely that human thoughts and emotions can be understood as modes of etheric or refined *qi*. In other words, consciousness in general can be understood according to the same *qi*-realism that explains the behaviors and tendencies of other phenomena. As the famous Song-dynasty philosopher Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200) says, “The capacity for awareness is the numinous aspect of *qi*” 能覺者，氣之靈也。⁵⁷ The contemporary scholar Yung Sik Kim explains:

Mind, for Zhu Xi, was really nothing but *qi*, its “essential and refreshing” (*jingshuang* 精爽) or “numinous” (*ling* 靈) portion, to be more specific. Thus, *qi* was endowed with qualities of mind, and could interact with the mind. The mind-*qi* interaction was not restricted to man’s *qi* and his own mind, but was extended to the *qi* of the outside world and to the minds of others.⁵⁸

In other words, in a *qi*-based worldview, an individual’s mental life is not simply an internal experience, nor is it restricted to the confines of her physical body. Practices such as quiet-sitting are methods to refine the *qi* of the heart-mind to attain greater spiritual (*shen* 神) clarity. Joseph Adler describes the most “spiritual” attainment of consciousness as

“mind-*qi* in its finest, most free-flowing state,”⁵⁹ underscoring the potential for the *qi*-based energy of the heart-mind to exert efficacious reach into the surrounding world.

This same *qi*-based worldview that explains consciousness also explains the existence of ghosts, spirits, gods, and so forth. Chinese traditions recognize the existence of multiple spiritual energies that make up the person, especially the *yin*-spirits and *yang*-spirits associated with the categories *hun* 魂 and *po* 魄. These account for different bodily, mental, and emotional functions of the person while alive, and some of them continue on their own course after bodily death as different varieties of ghosts (*gui* 鬼) and spirits (*shen* 神).⁶⁰



All are emergent phenomena made possible by the behavioral tendencies and dynamic vitality of the matter–energy matrix of *qi*. Adler comments that “underlying both

ancestor worship and the acceptance by Neo-Confucians of the existence of ghosts, demons, and other occult (*yin*) phenomena is a systematic theory of mind and *qi* that provides for what we might call ‘emergent spirituality.’”⁶¹ When Zhu Xi says, as we quoted him earlier, that the “capacity for awareness is the numinous aspect of *qi*,” there is nothing to prevent us from understanding fully developed human cognition as an emergent phenomenon related to the complex interactions of *qi*-based generative forces that

⁵⁷ Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi yulei*, translated from the *Zhuzi yulei* at *Chinese Text Project* (see *Xing li er* 性理二, *Xingqing xinyi deng mengyi* 性情心意等名義, passage 27). For the translation, I consulted Virág, “Moral Psychology and Cultivating the Self,” 40.

⁵⁸ Kim, “Zhu Xi on Scientific and Occult Subjects,” 129.

⁵⁹ Adler, “Varieties of Spiritual Experience,” 141.

⁶⁰ For a fuller discussion, see Brashier “Han Thanatology and the Division of ‘Souls.’”

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

give rise to it. And, as Adler's comment indicates, this emergent trajectory can be scaled up to discuss spirituality more broadly, or, for our purposes here, the emergence of local and specific supernatural or "hyphenatural" entities. This leads us to at least three conclusions regarding the supernatural derived from the emergentist narrative.

Firstly, understanding the language of emergence in terms of the dynamic vitality of *qi* can account for certain naturalistic explanatory models without thereby committing us to an entirely mechanistic, deterministic, or otherwise reductive scientific worldview.⁶² I suggest that this blurs the distinction between the "enchanted" and the "disenchanted" in a way that productively intervenes in the dominant Eurocentric narratives of modernity.

Secondly, the *qi*-based model situates all emergent phenomena, both ordinary and extraordinary, within a constitutively politicized social context. The ancestral shrines are precisely such sites at which differences in power are negotiated between human and spiritual interests. Or, as Deborah Sommer has commented, in a recent study of what she calls Zhu Xi's "philosophy of religion": "Maintaining respectful relations with the spirit world was not just a religious matter: it was of great political importance for maintaining the order and prosperity of the state."⁶³ Here there is no "happy prearrangement" of harmony as in Mathews's holism; rather, harmony is an achievement that

must be daily negotiated, nurtured, and renewed.

Thirdly, following from the point above, our discussion is politicized in yet another sense: the cosmogonic position of spontaneous emergence under *qi*-realism allows for meaningful differences between supernatural phenomena to come into philosophical view, in a way that no version of either absolute transcendence or mystical holism ever will. As such, the emergence of increasingly refined and potent spiritual energies within the cosmos offers us a flexible and inclusive framework for discussing not only the diversity of religions today but also the power imbalances that situate different traditions unequally on a globalized stage. With that, we return again to my overall theme in this essay, which is that the pay-off of this religious debate over spontaneous emergence is less religious and more political. If we are judging work in the philosophy of religion in terms of how it empowers marginalized voices or intervenes in hegemonic Eurocentric practices, then the cosmogonic narrative of emergence will come to the fore as a capacious and inclusive theoretical framework.

Digression: Revisiting My Own God

My essay could end with the concluding thoughts above, but I have taken the theme of this special issue as an opportunity to reflect on my own position within the politicized approach to the supernatural that I have outlined so far. Although colonialism is indeed

⁶² A full discussion of the question of science is obviously beyond this essay, but some do attempt to connect *qi*-based philosophy with contemporary science and secular humanism (e.g., Liu, *Neo-Confucianism*; Brasovan, *Neo-Confucian Ecological Humanism*; Kim, "Science and Natural Philosophy: Zhu Xi on the Scientific Subjects and the Natural World"). Liu in particular encourages us to think of primordial *qi* in scientific terms as the quantum field in its vacuous state as understood in contemporary

physics (*Neo-Confucianism*, 54). In another work, "In Defense of Qi-Naturalism," Liu considers a contemporary argument "that the theory of primordial *qi* is the origination of the contemporary quantum field theory. [Scholar He Zuoxi] traces the quantum field theory to Einstein, Einstein to Leibniz, and Leibniz to the theory of primordial *qi*" (52). Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) was, of course, one of the earliest philosophers reading Chinese thought in Europe.

⁶³ Sommer, "Zhu Xi's Philosophy of Religion," 524.

associated with the proselytizing aims of Christianity, it is perhaps my own religion—Judaism—that initiated the condescending attitude toward so-called idolatry that later contributed to Christianity’s sense of its “civilizing” mission. The Hebrew Bible draws a hard line between worship of physical items such as statues (perhaps most famously the “golden calf” of Exodus 32) and worship of Judaism’s unseen and unseeable God. Over time, and through the influence of Aristotelian thought, Jewish theology articulated a classic version of the “narrative of transcendence.”

The famous philosopher Moses ben Maimon (“Maimonides” or the “Rambam,” 1138–1204) penned the statement on idol worship that remains influential in Jewish theology today. He traces idolatry back to the misguided practices of Enosh, identified in Genesis 4:26 as the grandson of Adam via Seth:

During the days of Enosh, humankind went seriously astray. The counsel of the sages of that generation became dull, and Enosh himself was among those who erred. This was their mistake: They said that since G-d created the stars and the spheres to govern the world, placed them on high, and apportioned them honor so that they would serve before Him as attendants, it would accordingly be fit for us to praise and glorify them and apportion them honor as well. . . . Subsequent to the arising of that thought in their hearts, they began to build temples to the stars, to make offerings to them, to praise and glorify them in words, and to prostrate themselves before them in order to obtain the favor of the Creator, all in accordance with their misconception. This was the essence of idolatry, not that they declared that there was no other god aside from this star.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Idolatry,” Chapter 1.

As the Rambam’s narrative expresses, the original idols were akin to symbolic representations of God’s creations, such as stars, but not themselves alternatives or competitors to the one true God.

However, over time, the original relationship with God (capitalized, absolute) was forgotten, and people began to worship the stars themselves as false gods (lower-case, diverse).

This worship of images, through kinds of service that differed from one to the next, spread throughout the whole world. People would offer them sacrifices and prostrate themselves before them. As the days went on, G-d’s glorious and awesome name was forgotten from the mouth and the mind of all beings, and no one knew Him. As a result, all the common people, the women, and the children knew only the image of wood or of stone and the stone temple, for they had been trained from their childhood to bow down to it, to serve it, and to swear by its name. The sages among them, such as their priests and their like, imagined that no other god existed aside from the stars and spheres for which these images had been made and which they were made to resemble. Aside from a few individuals, such as Enoch, Methuselah, Noah, Shem, and Eber, no one knew or recognized Him. In this way the world continued to unfold until the Pillar of the World was born, our patriarch Abraham.⁶⁵

Maimonides explains that Abraham himself was born into a family of star worshippers, but he was precocious and philosophical. Indeed, to take the great Rambam’s word for it, young Abraham sounds a lot like Aristotle: “After this powerful man was weaned but while still a child, he began to explore in his mind. He

⁶⁵ Ibid.

began to think day and night and wondered how it would be possible for the heavenly sphere to continually move with nothing impelling its motion. Who is causing it to revolve, since it would be impossible for itself to be the cause of its own rotation?"⁶⁶ By the age of forty, Abraham had reasoned his way to an understanding of the one, true, transcendent God at the origin of all creation, and, for Maimonides, this marks the beginning of the Jewish people: "When people would gather to him and ask him about his words, he would teach each person in accordance with their intellect until he would bring each back to the way of truth. He did this until thousands and tens of thousands had gathered. They were the people of the House of Abraham."⁶⁷

Maimonides gives us a strikingly contemporary take on the rationality of religion. For him, any people who understand the reality of God by the power of their own reason, as did Abraham, are included among God's "chosen people." Notably, Maimonides's interpretation of Jewish chosenness was not the only one, and disagreements over this issue in his lifetime reflect longstanding unsettled questions. Yehuda Halevi (d. 1141), in his philosophical work *Kuzari*, tells of a rabbi who once visited the King of the Khazars to discuss the relative merits of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. When the king questions whether the Jewish religion is for the Jews alone, Halevi answers: "Yes; but any Gentile who joins us unconditionally shares our good fortune, without, however, being quite equal to us. . . . because we are the pick of mankind."⁶⁸ He goes on to explain that the people of the familial line extending from Adam to Abraham were specially "permeated with the divine essence," making them closer to God

than other people and explaining the frequent appearance of prophets among them. This divine essence has continued to be passed along family lines through Abraham's descendants. Halevi is clear that converts to Judaism can become "pious and learned," but they cannot obtain the special divine spark via conversion.⁶⁹

Halevi tones down the apparent chauvinism by comparing the role of the Jewish people in humanity at large to the role of the heart in the body. The heart is the seat of the soul, and also responsible for overseeing the proper functioning of the rest of the body and its organs. When the heart is healthy, so is the whole body; and when the heart suffers, the body suffers, too. The Jews then, as the heart of humanity, bear a special responsibility to fulfill their covenant with God such that all people will benefit.⁷⁰

In the end, Halevi and Maimonides give us two distinct perspectives on the chosenness of the Jewish people: whereas Maimonides opens the religion up fully to any who comprehend the reality of the transcendent and universal God and accept that God's commandments, Halevi restricts the core of Judaism to those who are born into it. Maimonides's position may seem at first the more egalitarian, but Halevi perhaps ultimately leaves more room for diversity. In the words of a contemporary orthodox rabbi, "Many misread Yehudah Halevi's position as teaching the uniqueness of Judaism and the corollary falseness of other religions; we are true and they are wrong. However, . . . the correct reading is that the other religions are only limbs on the trunk of Judaism. Even Halevi's limiting of prophecy to Judaism does not preclude the availability of some form of revelation for all."⁷¹ Although Halevi and

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Halevi, *Sefer Kuzari*, Essay 1, passage 27.

⁶⁹ Ibid., Essay 1, passage 115.

⁷⁰ Ibid., Essay 2, passages 26 to 44.

⁷¹ Brill, "Judaism and Other Religions: An Orthodox Perspective."

Maimonides share the view that ultimately all roads lead to Judaism in the quest for absolute truth, their disagreements reveal underlying and ongoing tensions over the intimate relationship between a people and their local god. Even one of the earliest monotheistic theologies to define divine nature as transcendent and universal retains within itself deep, unsettled questions regarding God's universality and the Jewish people's specific cultural history. Still today, debates about conversion and the status of "chosenness" mark divisions between Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism as well as tensions between the American and Israeli Jewish experience.

Final Thoughts:

No Easy Answers Forthcoming from the Gods

I think it is appropriate at this moment to point out that my own God may or not recognize me, depending on which rabbi you ask. My father is "ethnically" Jewish (whatever that might mean). His family immigrated from the Jewish ghettos of Odessa to New York City in the early 1900s. My mother is white and grew up Protestant, but she converted to Judaism before I was born, and I was raised Jewish. We lived in rural southeastern Georgia and attended the closest synagogue to our home, an Orthodox congregation about forty-five minutes away, where I eventually completed my bas mitzvah. Growing up in small-town Georgia, as one of three Jewish children in our school system, my status as a religious and possibly ethnic minority was not in question. I was clearly labeled as Jewish within my community due to my religious practices, my apparently unpronounceable last name, and

my phenotypic appearance (i.e., I look stereotypically Ashkenazi).

For some rabbis, following Judaism's matrilineal line, the fact that my mother converted before my birth *should* render me Jewish. However, my mother converted through a Reform synagogue, and hence, for many Orthodox rabbis, her conversion is in fact *not* sufficient. Moreover, were I to attempt to enact the Israeli "law of return," my claim to it *could* be the subject of substantial debate, and I might be asked to go through the full conversion process myself before relocation would be allowed.⁷² Thus, whereas those in my hometown had no doubts about my status as a Jew, this status is less clear to many in my own supposed religious community. In the house of *any* god, it seems, I am perpetually a guest.

So perhaps it is no surprise that I ended up in comparative philosophy, trying always to be the best guest possible in house after house. Does this very rootlessness make me a good agnostic after all, aligning me with the secular-humanistic trajectory of disenchantment? Or, then again, does this rootlessness make me somehow all the more Jewish, marking me with a specific heritage of nomadism, diaspora, and the jealous God who stalks the uneasy border of the local and the universal? Despite my visits to many gods, no easy answers are forthcoming, but perhaps some of the harder questions have come into sight.

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⁷² For more on the question of conversion through Reform institutions, see Malz, "Does Israel Discriminate Against Non-Orthodox Converts when

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