“Who Really Knows?”: Religion and Ritual: the Poetics and Performance of the Ineffable

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This special issue of the *Journal of Dharma Studies* came about as a result of a symposium titled “Religion and Ritual: The Poetics and Performance of the Ineffable” that was organized by the Center for South Asian Studies at University of Hawai’i at Mānoa in April 2018. The symposium itself was part of the Templeton Foundation Grant that we five Religious Studies scholars had received—J. Aaron Simmons, Martin Shuster, Amer Latif, William Edelglass, and Sai Bhatawadekar—to explore the ways in which the very ineffability of the divine is conceived and expressed across five world religions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. We were particularly interested in the productive tension between kataphatic (positing) and apophatic (negating) modes of understanding the divine.

For my own research, the quest after “apophatic negation” pointed me to Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad’s “neti neti” declaration, its student-teacher questioning, to Nāsadīya Sūkta’s dialetheism, and its ultimate unknowability. The “neti neti” (na-iti na-iti) ādeśa instructs the seeker of ultimate knowledge of *brahman* that no matter how one describes it, no matter which and how many predicates one uses, *brahman* is “not so, not so.” Occasionally in the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, as in the dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Gārgī, it is said that the pursuit of *brahman* with incessant questioning will only cause one’s “head” to “shatter.” What “neti neti” and such head shattering dialogues suggest is that any attempts to contain the infinity of *brahman* in the confines of rational thought or language will have to be negated, and in the act of negation itself that the infinity is projected. With “neti neti” on one side, the other necessary brink of ineffability was the Nāsadīya Sūkta—the Hymn of Creation in the Ṛgveda. The hymn famously brings into play the twin of ineffability, namely, unknowability. It imaginatively and poetically posits the process of creation, yet plays constantly with various types of negation and contradiction, and most importantly, interrupts itself throughout the verse asking the question “who really knows?”. The question ultimately proves to be radically rhetorical: the hymn not only owns its own uncertainty, ignorance, and inability to know the nature of creation or the creator, but also doubts

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whether the supposed omniscient “One” knows it itself. Both the “*neti neti*” declaration and the Hymn of Creation reinforce that we, with our finite, conditioned understanding, are in no position to attribute anything to the divine absolute. They at once celebrate the imaginative, poetic, and performative power of language to point to the divine and yet its inability to capture it; language, thus, can bring itself to its own precipice. What they reiterate is that we must break our habit of categorical thinking, of containing a concept in our matrix; we must relinquish our need to have closure of a fully articulated consistent system, in which all questions are answered. We must cultivate a dimension of our philosophy, poetics, and performance that allows for positing and negating, filling and emptying, knowing in the very admittance of unknowing. If understanding is an act of *containing*, then relating to the divine must be an act of *spilling*. That is to say, when one seeks the divine, it is only as one tries to contain it that one realizes that it is fluid and infinite, the vessel that we are is limited, and we must let ourselves be overwhelmed at the rims. This play and continuous cycle of filling, spilling, and emptying reveals the interrelation between kataphatic (positing/articulated) and apophatic (negating/ineffable) modes, i.e., the interrelation among rational, linguistic, aesthetic, intuitive, and mystical ways to relate to the divine.

I had the opportunity to extend this project into a South Asian Studies symposium, which was an intellectually stimulating, politically charged, and emotionally stirring event. It brought many scholars together to explore the religio-philosophical idea of ineffability and its theoretical, poetic, and performative aspects. This included texts, rituals, practices, art, music, dance, and countless other ways in which the ineffable is performed and experienced—intellectually, emotionally, culturally, etc. As many of these elements are prevalent in a variety of religious and indigenous traditions, comparative/cross-cultural/inter-religious perspectives were also welcome to place Dharma Studies in context and connection with other regions and to promote a dialogue among world traditions. The papers addressed and problematized a spectrum of topics, from ancient to modern, from textual analysis to popular depictions, from metaphysics to environmental studies, from indigenous nuances to cross-cultural homogenization, from personal narratives to politics and violence. Selected papers from the symposium that are included in this special volume show that spectrum as well: while Edelglass and Forsthoefer theoretically engage with apophasis and epistemic humility, Parson and Joshi take on poetry in its traditional and cross-culturally influential manifestations. Dunn explores the embodiment of the ineffable, and Stoltenberg argues for the twirling spine of Kathak as Axis Mundi. Luthy analyzes the bhajans on the Ganga for their environmental consciousness; and Murti takes the Dharma Studies in conversation with Islam. During the 2-day symposium, we all went through many introspective as well as performative modes. In line with the apophatic dimension of the divine, we learned that in our life and in the way we relate to one another as colleagues, friends, and human beings, there are more questions than answers, more contradictions than consistency, more spilling than containing. At the end of the day, instead of shattering our heads, we laughed our hearts out.

In the unique process of creating this special issue, I also wanted to honor the inter-subjective and dialogical mission of the journal as well as the symposium. The papers were sent out to experts in the field for blind review, of course, but additionally, contributors were invited to peer-review another submission from this volume itself,

so that everyone, individually and as a group, could reflect on the internal connections and thematic coherence of the whole issue. This process also reflected the interactive nature of the symposium from which the special issue arose. I am very grateful to the Templeton Foundation Grant, to the Center for South Asian Studies and the Department of Religion at University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, to Ramdas Lamb for his involvement in organizing the symposium, to Arindam Chakrabarti for his support and intellectual dexterity, and to Purushottama Bilimoria and Rita Sherma, the editors-in-chief of the *Journal of Dharma Studies*, who supported the idea of a special issue on this topic and invited me to guest-edit it. Lastly and most importantly, I am incredibly grateful to Laura Dunn, the managing editor of the journal, who was also a student participant in our Templeton Foundation Grant, for her incredible efficiency, scholarly quests, and grounded perspective on life.

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