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A Model of Experiential Comparative Religion

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Presented here is a higher-order vocabulary—with numerous examples—that can handle the fundamental elements of all traditions: not only the general ones (ontology/cosmology/anthropology/soteriology; consciousness/spiritual practice/teacher/transmission) but the particular ones (initiation, effort, bliss, illusion) and what might be called the "extra-traditional" ones (standard, intellect, what is "right"). The shorthand for this model is Hot/Cool/Structured/Unstructured.

Human beings are incorrigible comparers. "Daddy, are clouds mashed potato in the sky?" my son asked me at the age of five or so. Twenty years later, he is doing an MA that includes comparative religion. He is not finding it easy—and he isn’t the first. I don’t claim to have all the answers, in fact, I may not have any. But a lifetime of wrestling with this topic has led me to one conclusion: comparative religion must begin with a vocabulary, a form of seeing, that is of a higher order than the traditions themselves.

"Higher order" does not mean "wiser" of course. The aim is simply to fashion a shape in which we can place the various traditions (and without first having to make up our minds what a tradition is)—because only then can they move about with some degree of freedom. Then we can go in and out of them with some degree of freedom, too.

One of the attractions of this approach is that it is highly adjustable. Anyone can take the model I propose and fine-tune it by adding other elements or improving the ones I’ve given. It’s an adaptable shape, not a fixed one. So it’s got some life in it.

The starting point is two pairs of polar concepts: Hot and Cool; Structured and Unstructured (see Diagram 1).

Diagram 1
The Four Variables

Hot

Structured ———— Unstructured

Cool
Hot is that which is other than oneself; that which has its own life. It is not something that one has access to as of right. It is powerful and breathtaking, and is associated with revelation and grace. It is very similar to Otto’s numinous.

Cool is the very essence of oneself; one need not go to another to find it. Hence one does have access to it as of right. It is quiet and still, and is associated with self-realization.

The meaning of Structured is that there is an inherent order in the cosmos and therefore in the human condition. There is something to be discovered and there is a way of discovering it. A map is required to find the destination.

By contrast, Unstructured teachings say that there is no gap between the starting point and the finishing post. Method and goal are identical. We are not separate from reality/truth/God and so no map is required. Everything is available now and always has been.

Although these four statements concerning the human condition are all related, they are based on quite different axioms. But they are all true. I shall give examples from the great traditions in a moment, but first we need to see that the two pairs can be combined—see Diagram 2.

**Diagram 2**

**The Four Combinations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hot</th>
<th>Hot Structured</th>
<th>Hot Unstructured</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structured</td>
<td>The cosmos is vast and inhabited by innumerable powerful beings; liberation consists in finding one’s way through the labyrinth with the appropriate passwords</td>
<td>There is a divine power, quite other than oneself, which encloses us and is the source of liberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool Structured</td>
<td>Liberation is within oneself but it must be uncovered by disciplined practice</td>
<td>Cool Unstructured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool</td>
<td></td>
<td>One’s own nature is liberation; everything else is illusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unstructured

This model can hold a lot of detail. For example, we can use it to highlight different versions of four categories that are fundamental to all traditions in some form or other:

- **ontology**
- **cosmology**
- **anthropology**
- **soteriology**

The nature of reality
The nature of the universe
The nature of humankind
The nature of liberation

The different versions of these four are given in Diagram 3.
Diagram 3
The Different Categories of Teaching Found in Spiritual Traditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hot</th>
<th>Unstructured</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontology: only God is real; he is unknowable</td>
<td>Ontology: only the Self is real; or reality is empty (shunya)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmology: the universe is God's creation/projection and is entirely dependent upon him</td>
<td>Cosmology: illusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropology: humankind is nothing before God</td>
<td>Anthropology: humankind is identical with reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soteriology: acceptance of God's will</td>
<td>Soteriology: know yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured</td>
<td>Cool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontology: everything has its place; everything comes and goes</td>
<td>Anthropology: humankind is the centre of the universe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmology: a harmonious whole</td>
<td>Soteriology: clear awareness; nonentanglement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropology: humankind contains all powers [the microcosm/macrocosm homology]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soteriology: the great journey; the initiatic adventure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting to look at the subtraditions within Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism (in that order) that fit each section of the model, along with some essential characteristics and images that exemplify them—see Diagram 4. We can bring together teachings as diverse as Tantra, Pentecostalism, Advaita Vedanta, and Theravada Buddhism; and also relate qualities such as bliss and awareness, or hierarchy and (pure) being, which are central to any discussion of the spiritual life.

However, a few explanations may be needed.

First, it is no accident that the characteristics on the Structured side are more numerous than those of the Unstructured side. Naturally (and I use the word in its literal sense), the Unstructured cannot have a wealth of qualities since it obliterates distinctions.

Second, the members of each polar pair complement each other. Take Hot Structured and Cool Structured as examples (see Diagram 4):
Diagram 4
Further Aspects of the Model

**Hot**

**Examples:**
- "esoteric" Christianity (Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism)
- Hindu tantra
- Vajrayana

**Characteristics:**
- knowledge (in the initiatory sense)
- hierarchical
- will
- expansion away from a point
- hot magic (necessary and powerful)

**Images:**
- magician, gambler
- JUMP!

**Structured**

**Examples:**
- Philokalia/Prayer of the Heart
- Patanjali
- Theravada

**Characteristics:**
- awareness
- gradual
- effort
- concentration on a point
- cool magic (optional and peripheral)

**Images:**
- yogi, craftsman
- WORK!

**Cool**

**Unstructured**

**Examples:**
- Pentacostalism
- Chaitanya
- Pure Land

**Characteristics:**
- bliss

**Images:**
- lover, martyr
- SUBMIT!

**Hot Structured**

initiatory knowledge is something one is granted—and it may be disturbing

the path requires the exercise of will, which allows the practitioner to break through the barriers that are in his/her way in an ever-increasing series of leaps

it also requires the use of (hot) magic, which is simply the manipulation of the laws of the cosmos in the service of self-transformation; this is not an option—it is bound to happen and one has to be prepared for it by rigorous training examples:

Vedic ritual, which is concerned with participation in the sacred world of the gods;

Don Juan's way of the *nagual*, which is full of the unexpected if not downright impossible. (I leave aside the question of whether Castaneda invented the whole thing.)

**Cool Structured**

awareness is dispassionate and part of oneself

all that is required is constant effort; the path is very restrained; there is a task to be accomplished but the method is ordered and gentle; the practitioner starts on page one of the manual, so to speak, and works his/her way through to the end; everything happens as it should in the fullness of time at a certain point, (cool) magical powers appear, it is true—but they are incidental to the aim, which is balance and timing examples:

Confucian ritual, which aims to establish a correct relationship with the cosmic principle;

*The Course in Miracles*, which is "magical" but so reassuring.
Similarly, JUMP! and WORK! have an element in common (they are both Structured), just as JUMP! and SUBMIT! do (though this time it is the Hot element); and similarly for SUBMIT! and LET GO! (both Unstructured) and WORK! and LET GO! (both Cool).

Third, the opposite corners of the model have nothing in common (which is to say that they will find great difficulty in communicating with, or even understanding, each other): the magician (Hot Structured) regards the hermit (Cool Unstructured) as a stick-in-the-mud, someone who avoids life and its challenges, while the hermit sees the magician as at best all show and flummery, and at worst as positively dangerous. The yogi (Cool Structured) looks upon the martyr (Hot Unstructured) as someone with more conviction than sense; the lover has no doubt that the craftsman has missed the point completely.

Similarly, JUMP! (Hot Structured) is the exact opposite of LET GO! (Cool Unstructured); and the same is true of the other two corners: SUBMIT! (Hot Unstructured) and WORK! (Cool Structured).

I am not saying that the traditions I have given as examples are limited to the section of the model to which I have assigned them. Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, which is the best-known form of Vajrayana, has an obvious Cool Structured side (or level). But I am saying that its highest values are Hot Structured rather than Cool Structured. That is why, in the end, it is worlds away from Theravada, whose highest values are Cool Structured (even if some of its forms present nibbana as a Cool Unstructured ideal).

We can also apply the model to the four principles of what I call spiritual psychology:

human beings are best understood in terms of consciousness and its manifestations;
consciousness can be transformed by spiritual practice;
there are gurus/masters/teachers who have done this;
and there can be transmission of this awareness from teacher to disciple.

(See Diagram 5.)

Diagram 5
Spiritual Psychology According to the Model

Hot

Consciousness: divine and hierarchical
Spiritual Practice: a series of leaps/initiations
Teacher: magician/knows the secret
Transmission: by ordeal

Structured

Consciousness: natural and particularized
Spiritual Practice: graduated and gentle
Teacher: clear discriminator/guide
Transmission: learning how to use a map

Unstructured

Consciousness: natural and universal
Spiritual Practice: just realize
Teacher: embodies truth
Transmission: none—truth already exists

Cool

Consciousness: divine and universal
Spiritual Practice: submission
Teacher: servant of God/embodiment of God
Transmission: a gift

Consciousness: divine and hierarchical
Spiritual Practice: submission
Teacher: servant of God/embodiment of God
Transmission: a gift
Diagram 6
Traditions and Spiritual Psychology
**COOL STRUCTURED**

**Traditional Way of Life**
- organic, intricate

**Spiritual Qualities**
- Social: responding to the needs of beings
- Individual: unpretentious, simple

**Teaching**
- Nature of teaching: open, complete, ordered
- Consciousness: natural and spread out
- Ontology: everything has its place
- Cosmology: a harmonious whole
- Anthropology: humankind is the centre of the universe
- Soteriology: nonentanglement

**Teacher-Pupil Transmission**
- Teacher: clear discrimination/guide
- Transmission: follow the map

**Spiritual Practice**
- graduated and gentle

**Inner States**

Diagram 7
Traditions and Spiritual Psychology
**HOT STRUCTURED**

**Traditional Way of Life**
- crucible/means of transmission

**Spiritual Qualities**
- Social: a whirlwind of projects
- Individual: ecstatic, unpredictable

**Teaching**
- Nature of teaching: cryptic/esoteric
- Consciousness: divine and hierarchical
- Ontology: many powers, many beings
- Cosmology: a vast labyrinth
- Anthropology: microcosm/macrocosm homology
- Soteriology: the great adventure

**Teacher-Pupil Transmission**
- Teacher: magician/trickster
- Transmission: by ordeal

**Spiritual Practice**
- recreating the cosmic within oneself

**Inner States**
- access to all levels, all powers

Realization/Liberation
- detachment brings freedom

Realization/Liberation
- serving the cosmic purpose
Diagram 8
Traditions and Spiritual Psychology
HOT UNSTRUCTURED

Traditional Way of Life
celebration of the divine

Spiritual Qualities
Social: serving the divine
Individual: giving love; responding to the love of others

Teaching
Nature of teaching: only God
Consciousness: divine and universal
Ontology: only God exists
Cosmology: God's projection/play
Anthropology: humankind is nothing before God
Soteriology: acceptance of God's will

Teacher-Pupil Transmission
Teacher: servant/embodiment of God
Transmission: a gift

Spiritual Practice
submission
Inner States
remembrance of God

Realization/Liberation
to love and serve God

Diagram 9
Traditions and Spiritual Psychology
COOL UNSTRUCTURED

Traditional Way of Life
none

Spiritual Qualities
Social: let things be
Individual: unruffled calm

Teaching
Nature of teaching: there is no teaching
Consciousness: natural and universal
Ontology: only the Self exists
Cosmology: illusion
Anthropology: humankind is identical with reality
Soteriology: know yourself

Teacher-Pupil Transmission
Teacher: embodies truth
Transmission: none—truth already exists

Spiritual Practice
just realize
Inner States
oneness

Realization/Liberation
the Self is already complete

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And we can apply the model to Hot/Cool/Structured/Unstructured traditions (see Diagrams 6,7,8,9). (Note that these diagrams include the four principles of spiritual psychology: consciousness comes under teaching; spiritual practice is spiritual practice; teachers and transmission come under teacher-pupil transmission.)

Diagram 10
The Four Different Meanings of “Teaching”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structured</th>
<th>Unstructured</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hot</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teaching is open and complete but there is no point in reading p. 100 before you read p. 1.</td>
<td>The teaching is constantly given—the same truth over and over again—but no one understands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patanjali's Yoga Sutras are a good example</td>
<td>Ramana Maharshi, Taoism, and Zen are examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every aspect of the spiritual life can be placed in this model. And that includes the notion of “teaching” itself (see Diagram 10). But here are some others. After The Book of Enlightened Masters (see Notes) came out, I received a letter from a reader who was concerned about standards in the spiritual life. In fact, the very idea that there are standards that are straightforwardly graspable is itself Cool Structured. Clearly, Hot Structured, Hot Unstructured and Cool Unstructured will see the matter very differently:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool Unstructured</td>
<td>only one standard—so it isn’t really a standard at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot Unstructured</td>
<td>only one standard (God)—so it’s beyond all standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot Structured</td>
<td>many standards, all of them stretchable and collapsible before your very eyes (assuming you can catch a glimpse of them in the first place)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This affects the question of whether a teacher lives up to certain standards—an issue I come back to at the end of this article.
The nature, place, and function of the intellect also change its import according to the Hot/Cool/Structured/Unstructured model. And just as accessible/rational standards are Cool Structured, so is the intellect as it is understood and lauded in the modern West. But Unstructured teachings, whose highest value is beyond form, are never going to have much time for a faculty that is by its very nature concerned with form and structure. Nor are Hot teachings: they will always place something way beyond the intellect at the centre of the path (and as the knower of truth). For Hot Unstructured traditions, it will be faith or love; for Hot Structured ones, it will be courage, risk-taking. Of course, there is nothing wrong with the Cool Structured ideal: everything has its place in the great scheme of things and it's all discoverable with the right tools and the right method. But it is only one option. And it has its limitations (as all the possibilities—Cool Structured, Hot Structured, Hot Unstructured, Cool Unstructured—do). Not to realize this is to dress up cultural prejudice in the guise of spiritual evaluation.

Then there is the notion of universalism: there are Cool Structured / Hot Structured / Hot Unstructured / Cool Unstructured versions of it (see Diagram 11).

Diagram 11
The Four Different Meanings of “Universalism”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hot</th>
<th>There is only God or the divine. When all you see are His projections, things appear different; when you see Him, everything has just one taste. This is the universal truth—but whether you &quot;get&quot; it or not is in His hands.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structured</td>
<td>All paths can lead to the same goal, like radii of a circle which meet at the centre. But you should stick to the path you are on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool</td>
<td>Space always exists. It's the only thing that does—except that you can't even say it &quot;exists.&quot; Only things in space do that; then they stop existing. The universal teaching always points to space, never to &quot;things.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The last example I want to give is that old bugbear, ethics/morality. Shouldn’t a path embody or teach the “right” way to be and to behave? Answer: yes—but, as we would expect by now, the way this is done depends on the vocabulary and values we are using. Rationalism, which is the dominant ethos of our culture, is Cool Structured. Therefore it expects rational, considerate behaviour. But a Hot Structured teacher isn’t going to buy that: s/he’s going to be demanding, unpredictable and ostensibly inconsiderate. (Gurdjieff is a good example in modern times; so is Neem Karoli Baba—see the excellent Miracle of Love by Ram Dass [Dutton, NY, 1979]). Some may not find such an option convincing or attractive. But that’s another matter. The point is that from a Hot Structured perspective, such behaviour is entirely appropriate—in fact, beneficial (whereas rational, considerate behaviour, the Cool Structured ideal, isn’t).

A Hot Unstructured teaching or teacher, on the other hand, will frequently—and perhaps ultimately—be utterly impractical (when seen from a Cool Structured point of view). Bliss tends to be like that. (As Ramakrishna once said, “First love God; then build your hospitals and schools.”) And it can burn, too. It says, “Throw all that stuff out!” “What?” we cry, “Throw out everything in my life? Be reasonable!” But the Hot Unstructured isn’t reasonable.

As for the Cool Unstructured, it just doesn’t pay any attention to the things of life. When Ramana Maharshi first went to Arunachala at the age of 17, he was so absorbed in the Self that he just sat there. Boys threw stones at him. He didn’t even notice, much less complain about it. Gradually, over the next 50 years, an ashram grew up around him. He just let it. It had nothing to do with him. Some people complained that Brahmins were being fed separately from untouchables, as caste rules required. How could a place dedicated to the one Self that is found equally in all be caught up in such petty—such false—matters? Ramana paid no attention to these complaints, just as he paid no attention to the structure that had perpetuated caste distinctions in the first place. He just remained the same: the ultimate (and only) Cool Unstructured ideal.

My final point is this. It is our great good fortune that we live in a time and place where exemplars of the entire range of Hot / Cool / Structured / Unstructured splendour are available. Of course, there are weak and distorted versions of all of them. But that’s always been so. And because they are all available, they can in some sense be compared. What this sense might be is still in the process of being established. But it’s being established by us, those of us who are on the journey. That is why this article is entitled, “A Model of Experiential Comparative Religion.” It’s new and it’s right here, waiting for us to go out and discover it.

Notes

The basic ideas outlined here are an elaboration of what can be found in my book The Book of Enlightened Masters (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1997).