



# The Uses of Paradox: Religion, Self-Transformation, and the Absurd

*Matthew Bagger*

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In this groundbreaking comparative study, Matthew Bagger investigates the role of paradox in Western and Asian religious discourse. Drawing on both philosophy and social scientific theory, he offers a naturalistic explanation of religion's oft-noted propensity to sublime paradox and argues that religious thinkers employ intractable paradoxes as the basis for various techniques of self-transformation.

Considering the writings of Kierkegaard, Pseudo-Dionysus, St. John of the Cross, N?g?rjuna, and Chuang-tzu, among others, Bagger identifies two religious uses of paradox: cognitive asceticism, which wields the psychological discomfort of paradox as an instrument of self-transformation, and mysticism, which seeks to transform the self through an alleged extraordinary cognition that ineffably comprehends paradox. Bagger contrasts these techniques of self-transformation with skepticism, which cultivates the appearance of contradiction in order to divest a person of beliefs altogether.

Bagger further contends that a thinker's social attitudes determine his or her response to paradox. Attitudes concerning crossing the boundary of a social group prefigure attitudes concerning supposed truths that lie beyond the boundaries of understanding. Individuals who fear crossing the boundary of their social group and would prohibit them tend to use paradox ascetically, while individuals who find the controlled incorporation of outsiders enriching commonly find paradox revelatory.

Although scholars have long noted that religious discourse seems to cultivate and perpetuate paradox, their scholarship tends to ratify religious attitudes toward paradox instead of explaining the unusual reaction paradox provokes. A vital contribution to discussions of mystical experience, *The Uses of Paradox* reveals how much this experience relies on social attitudes and cosmological speculation.

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