

## Religious Pluralism

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Until recently philosophy of religion, as practiced in the West, has meant philosophy of the Christian religion and has concentrated primarily on the Christian (or the Judeo-Christian) concept of God. However, it is clear that in principle philosophy of religion has no confessional boundaries and is concerned with religion throughout the world and in its wide variety of forms. Accordingly, during the last 20 or so years Western philosophers of religion have increasingly felt obliged to take note of the fact that Christianity is only one of the great world faiths and that monotheism is only one of the major types of religion (see Chapter 85, Comparative Philosophy of Religion), so that it is now common for new texts on the subject to include a chapter on the problems of religious pluralism, which are primarily epistemological.

### The Epistemology of Religion and Conflicting Truth-Claims

A recent major development in the epistemology of religion has highlighted the problem of the conflicting truth-claims of the different religions. With the widespread consensus that the traditional theistic arguments fail to prove, and that the idea of probability has no useful purchase here – although there are prominent thinkers who resist these conclusions – a different approach to the rationality or otherwise of theistic belief has emerged. This centers upon religious experience as a putative cognition of God (see Chapter 48, Religious Experience). Religious people report a wide range of forms of distinctively religious experience, including mystical experiences of direct awareness of, and even union with, God; a sense of divine presence in moments of worship or of contemplation; an indirect consciousness of God in the feeling of absolute dependence upon a creator, or of a divine presence and activity mediated through the beauties and sublimities of nature, the claims of conscience, the profound significance of human love, the crises of birth and death, and many kinds of personal and historical events (see Chapter 26, Holiness). Can such modes of experience count as good grounds for belief in the reality of God or in a transcendent reality?

The older kind of apologetic used religious experience as a phenomenon that points to God as its cause. This is open to the objection that such experiences may have a purely natural origin in the human imagination (see Chapter 61, Naturalistic

Explanations of Theistic Belief). The universe, including human religious experience, thus remains objectively ambiguous. But the new type of apologetic starts at this point. It involves a shift from an external, or third person, use of religious experience to an internal, or first person, use. Instead of asking whether it is rational to infer God from the reported religious experiences of others, it asks whether it is rational for religious experiencers themselves to believe in the reality of God on the basis of their own experience. To take a paradigm case, was it rational for Jesus, vividly conscious of God's presence, so that the heavenly Father was as real to him as his human neighbors, to believe in God's reality? Would it not indeed have been irrational, a kind of cognitive suicide on his part, not so to believe?

At this point the "principle of credulity," or better, the principle of critical trust, is invoked, according to which it is rational to trust our experience as corresponding to reality except insofar as we have reason to distrust it (for further discussion of the principle of credulity, see Chapter 80, Evidentialism). We apply this principle in our ordinary experience of our physical environment: we do not need a reason to trust sense experience in general but rather a reason to distrust it on particular occasions. And it is claimed that the same principle should apply, impartially, to religious experience as a form of apparently cognitive experience. *Prima facie* it is an awareness of a non-physical divine reality; the critical task is to examine and assess possible overriding considerations.

This approach has been most massively and systematically presented by William Alston (1991). Given the basic principle that religious experience has parity with sense experience as a *prima facie* ground of rational belief, discussion centers upon reasons to trust one whilst distrusting the other. Such reasons are: first, whereas sense experience is universal and compulsory, religious experience is optional and confined to a limited number of people, so that whilst sensory reports can in principle be confirmed by anyone, religious experience reports cannot; and second, whereas sense experience produces a universally agreed description of the physical world, religious experience within the different traditions produces different and often incompatible descriptions of the divine.

The first objection has met with the reply that whereas our basic freedom as persons is not undermined by a compulsory awareness of the natural world, it would be undermined by a compulsory awareness of an unlimitedly valuable reality whose very existence lays a total claim upon us. Thus the difference on which the objection is based is matched by a corresponding difference between the putative objects of sensory and religious experience respectively. Hence it is appropriate for consciousness of God not to be forced upon us, as is our consciousness of the physical world; and it is accordingly possible for many people, as a result of upbringing or certain adverse circumstances, or of a conscious or unconscious choice, to shut it out (see Chapter 60, Divine Hiddenness).

The second objection, however, is more formidable. Alston claims (as do many other philosophers who adopt the same kind of apologetic) that because it is rational to base beliefs on religious experience, Christian religious experience entitles those who participate in it to hold distinctively Christian beliefs. But obviously by the same principle Islamic religious experience entitles Muslims to hold distinctively Islamic beliefs, Buddhist religious experience entitles Buddhists to hold distinctively Buddhist beliefs,

and so on. Alston acknowledges this and regards it as “the most difficult problem for my position” (Alston 1991, p. 255). It is an equally difficult problem for other related positions, such as the claim that the core Christian beliefs require no justification because they are “properly basic” (see Chapter 79, Reformed Epistemology).

Alston’s response is based upon the traditional assumption that there can be, at most, only one true religion, in the sense of a religion that teaches the truth. From a religious point of view the question now becomes: which is the true religion? Alston argues that since the beliefs of each major world faith are equally well based in religious experience, and there are no neutral grounds on which to choose between them, I must simply rely on my own form of religious experience and presume that the other forms are (wholly or partly) delusory. On analogy with rival ways of construing the world – for example, Aristotelian, Cartesian, Whiteheadian, – “the only rational course for me is to sit tight with the [epistemic] practice of which I am master and which serves me so well in guiding my activity in the world. Hence, by parity of reasoning, the rational thing for a practitioner of CP [Christian epistemic practice] to do is to continue to form Christian M-beliefs [beliefs about divine manifestations], and, more generally, to continue to accept, and operate in accordance with, the system of Christian belief” (Alston 1991, p. 274).

The problem raised by this defense does not lie in the advice to “sit tight” in the situation as Alston defines it, but in the way in which he defines the situation. For the assumption that only one of the competing sets of religious beliefs can be true conflicts with Alston’s basic principle that religious experience, like sense experience, gives rise to true beliefs (specific “defeaters” apart). Indeed Alston unintentionally reverses this basic principle by making religious experience within one’s own tradition the sole exception to the general rule that religious experience gives rise to *false* beliefs! For the only-one-true-religion premise, together with the fact that the experientially based beliefs of the different religions are often incompatible, entails that religious experience can be a valid basis for belief in the case of only one religion at most. In all other cases beliefs based upon religious experience are false insofar as they conflict with the privileged exception of one’s own religion. Thus the fact of religious diversity undermines the entire argument that religious experience has *prima facie* parity with sense experience in producing true beliefs.

## The Relation Between Religions

I place this area of discussion next because any solution to the problem just noted must be derived from it.

From a naturalistic point of view, according to which religion in all its forms is a delusory projection upon the universe of our human hopes, fears, or ideals (as Feuerbach believed), the truth-claims of the different religions are all false, and the fact that they conflict with one another does not present any problem. However the problem is acute from a religious point of view according to which religious experience, whilst obviously involving imaginative projection, is not purely this but is at the same time a cognitive response to a transcendent reality.

A variety of religious, as distinguished from naturalistic, interpretations of religion have been offered, each of which would solve the conflicting truth-claims problem in its own way.

### *Truth-claims exclusivism*

The most widely, if usually implicitly, held view is that there can only be one true religion, and that this is one's own. The others are false, at least insofar as their beliefs are incompatible with the home religion. This is what most of the adherents of each religion, including some but not all of its reflective thinkers, have generally assumed.

However, a "hermeneutic of suspicion" is provoked by the evident fact that in perhaps 99 percent of cases the religion to which one adheres (or against which one reacts) is selected by the accident of birth. Someone born to devout Muslim parents in Iran or Indonesia is very likely to be a Muslim; someone born to devout Buddhist parents in Thailand or Sri Lanka is very likely to be a Buddhist; someone born to devout Christian parents in Italy or Mexico is very likely to be a Catholic Christian; and so on. Thus there is a certain non-rational arbitrariness in the claim that the particular tradition within which one happens to have been born is the one and only true religion. And if the conviction is added that salvation and eternal life depend upon accepting its truths, it may well seem unfair that this saving truth is known only to one group in which only a minority of the human race have had the good fortune to find themselves.

This thought has been countered by some Christian philosophers by an appeal to middle knowledge – God's knowledge of what everyone *would* do in all possible circumstances – proposing that God knows of every individual who, because of the circumstances of his or her birth has not had an opportunity to respond to the Christian gospel, that they *would* have freely rejected it if they had heard it (see Chapter 56, Foreknowledge and Human Freedom). This suggestion, which could of course be deployed from within each religion, involves an idea that is theologically objectionable to many, namely that God has created vast numbers of people whom God knows will forfeit salvation. There is, however, among contemporary Christian thinkers, a strong inclusivist trend which separates knowing the truth from receiving salvation, and holds that some (or all) of those who do not in this life come to know the truth may nevertheless, by divine grace, either be counted now as "anonymous Christians" or may receive Christian salvation in or beyond death. The question here is whether there is not still an arbitrary privileging of one's own religion as the sole channel of salvation.

There are, however, other religious interpretations of religion which do not presuppose that there can only be one religion that knows the truth and is a locus of salvation. These are broadly described as pluralistic.

### *The transcendent unity of religions*

Proponents of the "perennial philosophy" such as Frithjof Schuon (1975), René Guenon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and others distinguish between the esoteric religion of the mystics and the exoteric religions of the mass of

believers. The former is, in its innermost core, identical across the different religions, whereas the latter, consisting of culturally conditioned concepts, doctrines, imagery, lifestyle, and spiritual practices, differ and are indeed at many points mutually incompatible. Each exoteric tradition (historical Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) should accordingly maintain its own unique individuality, because each is a valid expression of the ultimate reality that is directly known by the mystics in an experience that constitutes the transcendent unity of religion. Mysticism is here seen as the core of religion. One feature of this approach, which seems inadequate to some pluralists, is that it requires no reformation of the historical religions.

Considerable discussion has centered upon the question whether unitive mysticism constitutes (as is claimed for it) a direct and unmediated awareness of the ultimate divine reality, or whether even this experience is conditioned by the thought-forms of the mystic's tradition (see Katz 1978; see also Chapter 83, *Philosophical Reflection on Mysticism*). For whilst some unitive mystics report union with a divine person, others report union with a non- or trans-personal reality. Are these differences to be attributed to varying theological interpretations of a common ineffable experience, or are the reports to be accepted as accounts of genuinely different experiences? Or should we hold that a pre-conscious interpretative activity enters into the formation of the conscious experience, so that it may be true both that mystics of different traditions are encountering the same reality and yet also that their actual conscious experiences are characteristically different?

### *Multiple aspects and complementarity pluralism*

These alternatives tend to merge. Peter Byrne (Byrne 1995) holds that there is an Ultimate Reality with many aspects, some personal and some non-personal, and that each of the great world faiths arises from awareness of one of these aspects. The result is that "different religions have complementary insights into the one reality and thus that a fuller account of that reality can be provided if these insights are set alongside each other" (p. 165). Ninian Smart (in Kellenberger 1993 and elsewhere) and Keith Ward (1994 and elsewhere) likewise stress the idea of the complementarity of the world religions. Ward affirms a "Supreme Spiritual Reality," different but complementary aspects of which have been revealed within the different world religions. Thus, for example, "the Semitic and Indian traditions are complementary, emphasizing the active and unchanging poles respectively of the Supreme Spiritual Reality to which they both seek to relate" (1994, p. 331). And through their friendly interactions, each seeking to learn from the others, a "convergent spirituality" may emerge in forms that cannot be known in advance. The question that arises here is whether these different "aspects" are such that they can coherently be attributed to the same reality.

That question is addressed in another version of complementary pluralism, that of John Cobb, based on the metaphysics of A. N. Whitehead. According to Whitehead there are three equally ultimate realities, Creativity, God, and the Cosmos. The focus of the theistic religions is God; the focus of Buddhism, with Buddhism's stress on transitoriness and "emptiness," is Creativity; and the focus of primal and contemporary North American religion is the cosmos, the physical world around us. Cobb says that the different religions thus embody "diverse aspects of the totality of reality" (Cobb

1999, p. 135). This is a comprehensive proposal; its limitation, however, is that it depends on a prior acceptance of Whitehead's philosophy.

### *Polycentric pluralism*

The complementary and multiple aspect forms of pluralism are both "polycentric," but another, more explicit version of this is offered by the theologian Mark Heim, who sees each of the world religions as different paths to different ends, both in this life and in the afterlife. Christians live a Christian life and then eternally in the Christian heaven; Muslims live an Islamic life and then eternally in the Islamic paradise; Buddhists live a Buddhist life and attain to the eternal state of Nirvana; and so on. Heim holds that each person freely chooses the path and the end that he/she desires, so that each is satisfied, and the totality constitutes a rich variety that is pleasing to God. In Heim's case this is not, strictly speaking, a version of pluralism because he explicitly holds that the Christian heaven is the highest and best end state, the others being variously less good. But the problem that is worth highlighting, because it applies equally to the other polycentric theory that I shall come to presently, is that it is unrealistic to think that each person freely chooses the religion to which they adhere, with its distinctive path in life and its promised post-mortem state. As we have seen, in the vast majority of cases human beings inherit their religion along with their language and culture, rather than choosing it from among a number of options. If one religion and its end state is superior to all others, the situation becomes profoundly unfair, and incompatible with any idea of a just or loving God.

A more philosophically sophisticated theory is offered by Stephen Kaplan. To do full justice to its complexities it is necessary to read Kaplan himself. But, in brief, he uses the physicist David Bohm's holographic model. A holograph records the information necessary to produce a three-dimensional image which will appear differently when seen from different angles and distances. In religion these different appearances are the different God figures of the theistic traditions. This is the explicate order of reality, which provides for the diversity of deities, and also for the Buddhist conception of an ever-changing flow of events. But the implicate order (which, he stipulates, is logically required by the explicate order) is unitary, corresponding in religion to the non-dual Brahman. All these different "ultimate realities," theistic and non-theistic, are equally real and equally valuable. However, in more usual philosophical terms, these are not different ultimate realities, but different aspects, implicate and explicate, of a single ultimate reality. A question that arises is: in what sense are they all equally valuable? And, like Heim, Kaplan believes that each individual chooses his or her preferred path, which, as noted above, is completely unrealistic.

### *The Kantian-type pluralist hypothesis*

The Kantian-type pluralist hypothesis (Hick 1989 and elsewhere) is based upon a Kantian-type distinction between the Real (or the Divine or the Ultimate) in itself and the Real as variously humanly conceived and experienced. The modern consensus that the perceiver always contributes to the form in which the environment is perceived was most influentially introduced into philosophy by Immanuel Kant, but has been



reinforced by work in cognitive psychology, in the sociology of knowledge, and also now in quantum physics. It is now a commonplace that we do not perceive the physical world as it is in itself, unobserved, but always and necessarily as it appears to beings with our particular sensory equipment and conceptual resources.

Kant sought to identify the concepts in terms of which we order and give meaning to our experience in the activity of bringing it to consciousness. We can apply the same method to religious experience. The pluralistic hypothesis is that the Real (to select this term from several equally appropriate ones) in itself is present to us, or impinges upon us, all the time and that when this impingement comes to consciousness it takes the form of what we call religious experience – or often, in secular societies, in awareness of a moral imperative. Such experience is, however, very diverse, depending upon the set of religious concepts in terms of which it is constructed. The two basic concepts are deity, or the Real as personal, and the absolute, or the Real as non-personal, the former issuing in the theistic and the latter in the non-theistic forms of religion. We are not, however, aware of deity in general or of the absolute in general. These concepts are (in Kantian language) schematized or made more concrete, not, however as in Kant's system, in terms of abstract time, but in terms of the filled time of history and culture. Thus human beings are specifically aware of the Yahweh who chose and specially treasures the children of Israel; or of the Vishnu or the Siva worshipped within the Hindu traditions; or of the Holy Trinity of Christian devotion; or of the God whose angel revealed to the prophet Muhammad the words of the Qur'an; and so on. These, and the many other God figures, are *personae* of the Real, each jointly formed by its universal presence to humanity and the particular conceptualities and spiritual practices of the different theistic traditions. Again, the trans- or non-personal Brahman, Tao, Dharmakaya, Nirvana, Sunyata are *impersonae* of the Real, formed similarly but by means of very different concepts. The basic epistemological principle is that stated by Thomas Aquinas: "Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower" (*Summa Theologiae*, II/II.1.2).

On this hypothesis the nature of the Real in itself is beyond the range of our (other than purely formal) human concepts. It is in Western terms ineffable or transcategorical, or in Eastern terms formless. In Kantian language, the noumenal Real is humanly experienced as a range of divine phenomena.

The criterion by which religions are judged to be authentic or inauthentic, for this hypothesis, arises within a circular argument which is entered through the acceptance of the religious experience of one's own tradition as not purely imaginative projection but at the same time a cognitive response to a transcendent reality; and through the extension of this principle to other religions whose moral and spiritual fruits seem to be more or less on a par with those of one's own. These fruits thus provide a common criterion by which to recognize the salvific transformation of human existence from natural self-centeredness to a new orientation centered in the Real, a transformation which takes different concrete forms within different religious cultures.

This Kantian-type hypothesis addresses the problem of the conflicting truth-claims of the different religions by the proposal that they do not in fact conflict because they are claims about different manifestations of the Real to different human faith communities, each operating with its own conceptuality, spiritual practices, form of life, and treasury of myths and stories and historical memories. One of the main critical ques-

tions about this hypothesis is whether, in reducing the distinctive belief-systems of the different religions from absolute truths to reports of one human perception amongst others of the divine reality, it does not contradict the cherished self-understanding of each. Is it not inherently revisionary rather than purely descriptive?

The whole subject, within philosophy of religion, of the relation between the religious traditions presents so obvious a challenge to a dominant contemporary form of confessional religious apologetic, that it seems inevitable that it will be increasingly widely discussed in the coming decades.

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