## THE DIVERSITY OF RELIGIONS

There is an abounding plurality and rich diversity of religions in the contemporary world – both in terms of religious beliefs and practices – and globalization is creating a widespread awareness of this fact. Perhaps not surprisingly, along with the plethora of religious diversity, conflict in the name of religion is also pervasive and multifarious. From religious wars to individual acts of violence to verbal assault, discord among religions is an unfortunate reality of the past and present. In response, Tenzin Gyatso – the current Dalai Lama – has recently suggested that interreligious harmony can be achieved by developing understanding of other traditions and appreciating the value inherent within each of them.[1] I believe he is right about this.[2] In fact, it would behoove every educated person to have at least a basic understanding of the major religions, for ignorance in this domain tends to lead to suspicion, bigotry, and sometimes even violence, whereas understanding can lead to respect, empathy, and perhaps even trust.

In this chapter we will examine the issue of how one should understand and interpret the claims made by the various religions. And lest it be missed, religions do make claims – claims about reality and our place in it. As philosopher of religion Keith Yandell notes:

> *Of course* religions make claims – if they asserted nothing, there would be no religions… . It is in the very nature of a religion to offer an account of our situation, our problem, and its solution. Not every problem can arise in every situation; not every problem has the same solution. The account of our problem depends on the account of our situation; the account of our salvation depends on what we are and what we need to be saved from. To accept a religion is to embrace some particular and connected account of the situation and problem and solution.[3]

**The Dalai Lama** Tenzin Gyatso (1935–) – the fourteenth Dalai Lama – is the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. Tibetan Buddhists believe the Dalai Lama is one of innumerable incarnations of the bodhisattva of compassion. Tenzin Gyatso has received international recognition, including the Nobel Peace Prize, for his assiduous efforts for human rights and world peace. He has written many important books, including *Ethics for the New Millennium*, *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality*, and *The Art of Happiness*.



Some of these claims offered by the various religions are similar, if not identical. Others, however, directly contradict one another. And it is generally the contradictions which cause the most difficulty and lead to conflict. Consider the following views from several major world religions regarding a fundamental concern of religion – the soteriological (salvation) goal as typically understood in the respective traditions:

- **Hinduism**: the ultimate soteriological goal is *moksha*, release from the cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*), and absorption into Brahman. This can be accomplished by following one of the three paths (*margas*): (1) the path of knowledge (*jnanamarga*), (2) the path of devotion (*bhaktimarga*), or (3) the path of action (*karmamarga*).[4]
- **Buddhism**: the soteriological goal is *nirvana*, liberation from the wheel of *samsara* and extinction of all desires, cravings, and suffering. This is accomplished by understanding the four noble truths and practicing the final one: (1) all existence is suffering (*dukkha*), (2) all suffering is caused by craving (*trishna*), (3) all suffering can be ended (*nirvana*), and (4) the way to end suffering and achieve *nirvana* is by practicing the noble eightfold path (*astingika-marga*) of right views, right resolution or aspiration, right speech, right behavior, right livelihood, right effort, right thoughts, and right concentration.
- **Judaism**: the soteriological goal is blessedness with God – here and perhaps in the hereafter. This may be accomplished by fulfilling the divine commandments (*mitzvot*) which include engaging in the following practices (*sim chat Torah* – "the joy of the Torah"): (1) observance of the Sabbath, (2) regular attendance at synagogue, (3) celebration of the annual festivals, and (4) strict obedience to Jewish Law.[5]
- **Christianity**: the soteriological goal is spiritual transformation and spending eternity with God in the kingdom of heaven. This is accomplished by (1) God's grace (*charis*) manifested through Christ's atonement (*hilasterion*) for sin (*hamartion*), (2) receiving divine grace through faith (*pistis*) in Christ and the sacraments,[6] and (3) following the law (*nomos*) of God out of appreciation for the gift of grace.
- **Islam**: the soteriological goal is blessedness in paradise through submission to the laws of Allah and by His mercy. This may be accomplished by following the five pillars: (1) faith in Allah and his prophet Muhammad (*shahada*), (2) five daily prayers (*salah*), (3) almsgiving (*zakah*), (4) fasting (*sawm*), and (5) the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*).

There are a number of philosophical approaches to religious diversity – specifically regarding the conflicting truth claims of the various religions. A helpful delineation can be gleaned from the works of Joseph Runzo and Harold Netland:[7]

## PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES TO RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

1. **Atheism**: all religions are false; there is no religion whose central claims are true.
2. **Agnosticism**: there is no way to determine which, if any, of the religions is most likely to be true, and thus the best response is to remain agnostic about the claims of any religion.
3. **Religious relativism**: while each religion can be regarded as "true" and "effective" for its adherents, there is no objective or tradition-transcending sense in which we can speak of religious truth.
4. **Religious pluralism**: ultimately all world religions are correct, each offering a different path and partial perspective *vis-à-vis* the one Ultimate Reality.
5. **Religious inclusivism**: only one world religion is fully correct, but other world religions participate in or partially reveal some of the truth of the one correct religion; it is possible, however, to obtain salvation (or *nirvana*, or *moksha*, etc.) through other religions.
6. **Religious exclusivism**: one world religion is correct and all others are mistaken; salvation (or *nirvana*, *moksha*, etc.) is found only through this one religion.

Analyses of and responses to (1) and (2) are offered in Chapters 4 through 6. Obviously, neither of these positions is held by religious believers. In this chapter we will focus on (3)–(6). (3) and (4) are newcomers to the religious landscape, and at this time relatively few religious adherents actually affirm them. (5) and (6), on the other hand, are widely held by religious believers today, and it is with these two most prominent approaches that we begin.

## RELIGIOUS INCLUSIVISM AND EXCLUSIVISM

Religious inclusivists and exclusivists (as understood in this chapter) are in agreement on a number of issues related to religious diversity, including the belief that there is an objective reality to which religious truth claims point or correspond. They agree that one religion is, in some sense, closer to the truth about matters of God/Ultimate Reality and salvation/liberation[8] than the other religions. As noted above, most religious believers are inclusivists or exclusivists and thus hold that the central beliefs of their religion are truer, or closer approximations of the truth, than the central

*Table 2.1* Some central elements of five world religions

| | Judaism | Christianity | Islam | Hinduism | Buddhism |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **God/Ultimate Reality** | Yahweh (monotheism) | God (monotheistic trinitarianism) | Allah (monotheism) | Brahman (for some Hindus Brahman is the impersonal All) | *Nirvana* (Ultimate Reality – a state of perfection) |
| **The self** | body/soul | body/soul | body/soul | *atman* (for some Hindus, atman is Brahman) | *anatman* (non-self – the absence of a subsistent self or soul) |
| **Soteriological goal** | presence of Yahweh | eternity with God in heaven | eternity with Allah in paradise | *moksha* (liberation) from reincarnation | *nirvana* (liberation) |
| **Founder/ Messiah/ prophets/ founding priests** | Abraham/ Moses | Jesus – "The Christ" (Abraham/ Moses/Paul) | Muhammad – "The Prophet" (Abraham/ Moses) | Brahmanic priests | Siddhartha Gautama – "The Buddha" |

beliefs of the other religions. They emphasize the fact that the different religions contain within them seemingly incompatible truth-claims. For example, some of the essential beliefs of several of the major religions are captured in Table 2.1.[9]

While inclusivists and exclusivists agree that the different traditions contain incompatible truth-claims, they disagree about whether those religions outside their own also contain fundamental truths, and whether adherents of the other religions can obtain salvation/liberation. For exclusivists, fundamental truth is found in only one religion, and salvation/liberation is also exclusive to that one true religion. Inclusivists disagree. While they maintain that only one religion is privileged, they affirm that other religions also contain important truths. And they typically hold that true religious seekers – from whatever tradition – will, in the eschaton at least, find salvation/liberation. Theistic inclusivists affirm that God is present and working in and among all of the religions, even though God is most clearly manifested in one religion. They maintain that other theistic religions are right about there being a personal God (unlike Buddhists, say), but they disagree with other religions on different issues, such as the means for obtaining salvation/liberation. Non-theistic inclusivists affirm that Ultimate Reality is found by truth seekers from all of the world religions, but it is most clearly understood and articulated in the one privileged religion.[10]

### Objection to inclusivism and exclusivism: the "myth of neutrality"

One prominent objection to religious exclusivism and inclusivism is sometimes dubbed the "myth of neutrality," and it has been expressed in many forms. The basic idea is that there are no religiously neutral or objective criteria by which to determine whether one religion or worldview is true and others false, or whether one has more truth or falsity than another. So to claim that one religion is true, or offers the only way of salvation, is inappropriate and perhaps even morally offensive.

In reply, some exclusivists and inclusivists have argued that it doesn't matter if there are no criteria for such assessment, for religious beliefs are not the kinds of things which should be subject to rational assessment and that doing so perhaps reflects a lack of faith. This view is known as *fideism*, and will be discussed in Chapter 8. Other exclusivists and inclusivists disagree; they maintain that they are justified in affirming that their beliefs are exclusively (or inclusively) true because they are *warranted* – either by evidences from natural theology or by their beliefs being properly basic (also to be discussed in Chapter 8).[11]



### The justice objection

It is sometimes argued that exclusivists are committed to a position which is unjust. The problem is multifaceted, but one aspect of it is that there are billions of people, currently and historically, completely unaware of religions beyond their own. For the exclusivist, they are held morally and/or epistemically responsible for affirming religious truths of which they are not even aware. This objection is typically leveled against monotheistic religions which include a final judgment in the afterlife. How, for example, could the God of Christianity (if such a God exists) deny salvation to the countless people who have never even heard about the Christian faith? It seems unjust that God would condemn people to eternal perdition simply due to their lack of knowledge. And certainly there are good, sincere, devoted people in all of the major world religions. This is not so much a problem for inclusivists, for they do not agree that there is no salvation/liberation for those who haven't encountered the one true religion in this life. Some Christian inclusivists, for example, maintain that it is faith in God as God has revealed himself to the individual, as well as the atoning work of Christ, that brings salvation, and this could occur in this life or in the afterlife.[12]

Exclusivists have offered responses to the justice objection. For example, they sometimes draw upon the notion of God's middle knowledge and the counterfactuals of freedom to explain how a loving, omniscient, and omnipotent God could allow the "unreached" to miss the soteriological mark. As William Lane Craig argues, it is possible that there are no persons who have not heard the salvation message who would have responded in faith had they so heard that message.[13] Another response is that our human sense of justice may not be in harmony with God's sense of justice, for "God's ways are beyond our ways" (Isaiah 55:8–9). Yet another response exclusivists have offered is that because of sin, all people are deserving of divine judgment and wrath, and it is only by God's grace that any are saved. He chooses, then, for his own purposes, those who will and those who will not receive salvific grace.[14] This leads to the next objection.

**Counterfactuals of freedom**: counterfactual propositions (hypothetical statements in the subjunctive mood) which express the content of a free choice (e.g. "If you were to offer me a latte tomorrow at 5:30 p.m. while discussing religious pluralism, I would freely accept it.").

**Middle knowledge**: God's knowledge, logically prior to God's decree to create the world, of all true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom; that is, God's knowledge prior to creation of what every possible free creature would do under any possible set of circumstances.

> Religious Exclusivism is neither tolerable nor any longer intellectually honest in the context of our contemporary knowledge of other faiths.
>
> Joseph Runzo[15]

### The "scandal of particularity"

The phrase "scandal of particularity" is generally applied to the Christian view that God became human uniquely in Jesus of Nazareth. This view is considered "scandalous" because it seems incredible and even troubling that one particular, isolated event roughly 2,000 years ago would be the way in which God revealed Himself to the world. As noted above, there are billions of religious devotees who are unaware of Christianity – or any other religion beyond their own, for that matter – and know nothing about the God of the Christians. And so it is with the other religions taken from an exclusive point of view. Are we to believe that only those within one religion got it right? Are we to believe that they, and they alone, have the absolute truth about God/Ultimate Reality and salvation/ liberation, while everyone else got things completely wrong? Furthermore, doesn't the view whereby only one religion offers the true soteriological goal seem arrogant, imperialistic, and perhaps even immoral and oppressive?

One response to this objection is that God, if God exists, could reveal himself in any way he so chooses.[16] There could well be legitimate reasons why God may reveal himself in this way or that. Furthermore, just because some people may be unaware of a fact does not make it false. There are many important matters about which lots of people know nothing. For example, many people still do not know that the AIDS virus is spread from an infected person to an uninfected person through unprotected sex. Such ignorance should cause those "in the know" to work all the harder at communicating the "truth." So too, argue exclusivists, should those "in the *spiritual* know" work hard at communicating religious truth to those unaware.

Yet another response to this objection is that just because one makes an exclusive claim does not entail that he or she is arrogant, imperialistic, immoral or oppressive.[17] In fact, one who argues that exclusivism is false is, in a fundamental way, doing just as the exclusivist does: making a claim such that the opposing view is held to be false. So it seems that one cannot consistently judge exclusivism on these grounds without being hypocritical.



## RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Given the above concerns as well as others, some have denied exclusivism and gone farther than inclusivism in affirming truth within the different religions. One way of accomplishing this is through religious pluralism, the two most prominent versions being the pluralistic hypothesis and aspectual pluralism. We will look at each of them in turn.

### The pluralistic hypothesis

John Hick has developed one of the most impressive approaches to religious pluralism to date. He argues that there is a plurality of paths to salvation, and each of the great world religions offers such a path. He denies the view (widely held by atheists and others) that religion is only a human projection. However, utilizing Immanuel Kant's distinctions of noumena (things as they really are in themselves) and phenomena (things as they are experienced by us given the categories of our minds), Hick argues that one's experiences and descriptions *do* depend on the interpretive concepts through which one sees, structures, and understands them. So, while some experience and understand Ultimate Reality, or "the Real," in personal, theistic categories (e.g. as Allah or Yahweh), others do so in impersonal, pantheistic ways (e.g. as nirguna Brahman). Yet others experience and understand Ultimate Reality as completely non-personal (e.g. as *nirvana* or the *dao*). The Hindu parable of the blind men and the elephant poignantly reflects this point (see box below). For Hick, in our groping for the Real we are very much like the blind men – our viewpoints are constricted by our enculturated concepts.

In his monumental work, *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick utilizes these distinctions and argues for the pluralistic hypothesis:

> that there is an ultimate reality, which I refer to as the Real … which is in itself transcategorial (ineffable), beyond the range of our conceptual systems, but whose universal presence is humanly experienced in the various forms made possible by our conceptual-linguistic systems and spiritual practices.[18]

**The Blind Men and the Elephant**: God is like a large elephant surrounded by several blind men. One man touches the elephant's tail and thinks it is a rope. Another touches the trunk and thinks it is a snake. Another touches a leg and thinks it is a tree. Yet another touches the elephant's side and thinks it is a wall. They are all experiencing the same elephant but in very different ways. The same goes for God and the various religions.

**John Hick** (1922–) is Danforth Professor of the Philosophy of Religion, Emeritus, at Claremont Graduate University. He is one of the leading contemporary philosophers of religion and theologians, and the most prominent advocate of religious pluralism. He has published several widely influential books, including *An Interpretation of Religion*, *God Has Many Names*, and *The Myth of God Incarnate*.

Religious doctrines and dogmas are important for Hick, but what is fundamental in religion is the personal transformation that occurs within the religion. Thus, elsewhere, he adds that

> the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real within the major variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness – from non-saints to saints – is taking place.[19]

Hick uses several analogies to describe the pluralistic hypothesis with respect to different aspects of religion. One of the most interesting is the duck-rabbit picture which Ludwig Wittgenstein used in his influential work entitled the *Philosophical Investigations*[20] (see Figure 2.1[21]). A culture which has plenty of ducks but no familiarity with rabbits would see this ambiguous diagram as being a picture of a duck. Persons in this culture would not even be aware of the ambiguity. So too with the culture which has plenty of rabbits but no familiarity with ducks. Persons in this culture would see it as a picture of a rabbit. Hick's analogy is that the ineffable Real ("ineffable" means that its nature is beyond the scope of human concepts) is capable of being experienced – authentically experienced – in the different religions, *as* Yahweh, or *as* Allah, or *as* Vishnu, or *as* the *dao*, or *as* … , depending on one's religious concepts through which the individual experiences occur.

A number of objections have been raised against the pluralistic hypothesis and Hick's view in general. We will focus on two.

### Pluralism is logically contradictory

For Hick, no (major world) religion is superior to or truer than any other; they are on a par insofar as they produce saints (it could be argued that certain religions – Satanism, for example – do not produce saints). The great world religions, however, all include the notion that they are true; that they offer the right soteriological goal one should aim for and that they offer the best means for achieving that goal. So here's the problem. The pluralistic hypothesis seems to stand above the religions and



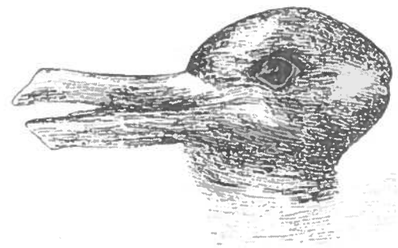

*Figure 2.1* Duck/rabbit image used by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his influential *Philosophical Investigations*

make an exclusive (non-pluralistic!) claim about the Real and salvation/liberation; namely, that the Real is experienced equally validly among the various religions and that they each offer valid expressions of the soteriological goal. But this appears to be self-contradictory. For in asserting that no religious position in reference to the Real and the soteriological goal is superior to or truer than another, Hick has in fact done just that – he has asserted that his own view is truer than and superior to all others.

In response, one could argue that that the pluralistic hypothesis is a meta-theory – a higher order theory *about* the religions rather than simply one more religious position among many – and as such is not susceptible to the charge of logical inconsistency.

### Pluralism leads to skepticism about the Real

The pluralistic view of the Real leads to another objection. The position that religious truth claims are entirely contextually bound and only about the phenomena (rather than the noumena) leads to a knowledge block (epistemic opacity) which arguably lands one in skepticism or agnosticism about the Real.[22] For if it is impossible to think or speak about the Real, and if attributes such as being good, loving, powerful, just (or impersonal, non-dual, etc.), don't actually apply to the Real since it is beyond our human conceptual field, how then can we be sure that the Real isn't merely a human psychological projection or wish fulfillment?

Hick's response, in good Kantian fashion, is that given the historically rich and broad religious experiences within the faith traditions, we must *posit* an objective Real to account for the rich experiences and transformations. However, the Real as construed by Hick is "beyond characterizations" and "neither personal nor nonpersonal." As such one wonders what it is that is posited and how such an "ineffable" posit can lead to the personal, moral transformation so integral to Hick's position.

### Aspectual pluralism

A second version of religious pluralism attempts to avoid some of the philosophical and other pitfalls of the pluralistic hypothesis. For the aspectual pluralist, there is an *objective* Ultimate Reality, and this Reality is *knowable* to us. Thus, unlike the pluralistic hypothesis, and in very non-Kantian fashion, we can offer valid descriptions of the noumenal – we can "get at" the Real. In fact, as philosopher and theologian Peter Byrne maintains, each of the different religions is reflecting some aspect of the Real: "the different systems of religious discourse are descriptive of one and the same reality because that reality has multiple aspects ... [and] ... the one transcendent manifests itself in diverse ways."[23] Byrne uses the notion of natural kinds in order to clarify the position. Just as the natural kind *gold* has an unobservable essence as well as observable properties or qualities – being yellow, lustrous, and hard – so too the Real has an essence with different experienced manifestations. The Real manifests different aspects of itself in the different religions given their own unique conceptual schemes, religious structures, and practices.[24]

#### *Aspectual pluralism leads to syncretism*

One alleged problem with this view is that since each of the religions is capturing only an *aspect* of the Real, it seems that one would obtain a better grasp of the Real essence by creating a new syncretistic religion in order to glean more aspects of the Real.[25] Byrne grants that "the fact that pluralism sees the individual traditions as aspects of an overlapping encounter with the one reality does indeed imply that as traditions they may well profit from sharing insights, spiritualities, and the like."[26] But he doesn't believe this must lead to syncretism. It could be argued, for example, that each tradition captures an aspect of the Real via the enculturated concepts within the tradition, and this aspect would be lost in a new syncretistic religion. If this is the case, the religious traditions are each necessary *as they are believed and practiced* in order for religious adherents to best understand and experience the Real.

**Natural kinds** are often understood to be groupings which are natural groupings. For example, human beings, dogs, and gold are each examples of natural kinds. They are distinct from the *properties* (such as being yellow, for example, or being 6′3′′) which are had by the individuals of the kind. Kinds cannot be reduced to the properties which are had by them.



#### *Aspectual pluralism leads to skepticism*

A related problem is that, on the aspectual view, since religious adherents are only glimpsing the Real through properties which are themselves enculturated within the various traditions, descriptions of the Real cannot be adequate *knowledge* claims about the Real. So, one is left with religious skepticism. Byrne clarifies the problem:

> If pluralism is true, then rich, living, doctrinally loaded accounts of the nature of transcendent reality and of salvation are both necessary and inevitably flawed ... They are inevitably flawed, for from the nature of the case they cannot claim strict truth with any certainty. That is to say, taken literally and positively they cannot claim with certainty to correspond in detail with the reality they refer to. The pluralist does not know which of these detailed, first-order beliefs is false. Some may be true. He or she considers that they are all radically uncertain.[27]

Byrne's response is that this type of objection can be deflected, but only partly so. He grants that pluralists are "mitigated skeptics." One just cannot be certain that any of the religions has got it right, and so it's best to recognize this and be agnostic about the interpretations of the religions.[28] However, the fundamental doctrinal claims of the religions, such as "Jesus is *the* Son of God," do have a cognitive point (they will help fashion modes of religious practice and experience, for example), and they *might* even have referential success and metaphorical truth. But the pluralist cannot in good conscience affirm that doctrinal statements are unequivocally and objectively true.

## RELIGIOUS RELATIVISM

A third way of responding to the conflicting truth claims of the different faith traditions is to remain committed to the truth of one's religious teachings while at the same time agreeing with some of the central concerns raised by pluralism. This can be accomplished by positing a view known as religious relativism. Joseph Runzo, perhaps its most prominent defender, has presented a version of religious relativism – what he calls "henofideism" – derived from the Greek term *heno* (one) and the Latin term *fide* (faith) – whereby the correctness of a religion is relative to the worldview of its community of adherents.[29]

Runzo grants that different religions are constituted by different experiences and mutually incompatible sets of truth claims, and that the different religions and experiences are themselves rooted in distinct worldviews which are incompatible with, if not contradictory to, the other religions and worldviews.[30] But he maintains that these differing experiences and incompatible worldviews emerge from the plurality of *phenomenal* divine realities experienced by the adherents of the religions.

On this view, it is understood that a person's worldview (that is, "the total cognitive web of our interrelated concepts, beliefs, and processes of rational thought"[31]) determines how one comprehends and experiences Ultimate Reality. Furthermore, "corresponding to differences of worldview, there are mutually incompatible, yet individually adequate, sets of conceptual-schema-relative truths."[32] In other words, the truth of a religion is determined by its adequacy to appropriately correspond to the worldview of which it is a part.

Runzo notes that religious relativism has several advantages over Hick's pluralistic hypothesis: (1) it offers a better account of the actual cognitive beliefs held by the adherents of the great world religions, for it affirms that each of the religions are making *true* fundamental claims, (2) it maintains the dignity of the various religions by accepting their differences as real and significant, and (3) it does not reduce the sense of the reality of the Real to a mere "image" as pluralism unintentionally does. Rather, it keeps the Real as the direct object of religious faith.

Furthermore, I would add that it has several advantages over aspectual pluralism: (1) it offers a better account of the actual cognitive beliefs held by the adherents of the great world religions, (2) it isn't offering only a partial (aspectual) view, but rather a full and (arguably) conceptually adequate description of the Real as professed within the different religions, and (3) it doesn't demand a new, syncretistic religion in order to better grasp Ultimate Reality.

Despite these advantages over pluralism, however, there are also significant objections to this version of religious relativism.

### An inadequate description of actual religious beliefs

While relativism seems to offer a *better* account than pluralism of the actual cognitive beliefs of the adherents of the religions, it nevertheless falls short of their *actual* beliefs. For example, Muslim adherents haven't historically held, nor do their scholars and teachers (imams) typically hold, that Allah is the *true* God *only with respect to the worldview of Islam*. To the contrary, for Muslims the truth of Allah as described in the Qur'an is taken to be unequivocally and objectively true. For the Islamic believer, Allah is the one and only true God for everyone regardless of what one's worldview happens to be. So too among the other faith traditions; their beliefs are typically understood to be true in an objective and absolute sense. In effect, adherents of the religions have historically been exclusivists rather than relativists.

Nonetheless, one could reply that simply because religious adherents typically are and have been exclusivists has no bearing on whether they (and we) should remain so. Up until the last century, most people held to some form of Euclidean space as reflecting the true nature of the world, but that does not mean we should do so today.



### Relativism is incoherent

Another objection is that religious relativism is logically incoherent since it cannot be consistently maintained that truth is individualistic – a position entailed by relativism. However, it can be argued that while this is perhaps a fair assessment of what's referred to as "subjectivism" (a position in which truth is relative to each person's idiosyncratic worldview), this does not apply to henofideism, for on the henofideists' account, truth is relativized to the worldview of a culture rather than relativized individually.

## EVALUATING RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS

As noted at the beginning of the chapter, religions make claims – truth-claims – and they make such claims about fundamental matters of human existence, Ultimate Reality, life after death, and so on. As we also saw above, there are different approaches to understanding the truth-claims made by the religions: some maintain that religious truth-claims are all false (atheists) or that there is no way to know if religious claims are true or false (agnostics); others maintain that each religion has its own truth, but that there is no objective or universal truth regarding religious claims (relativism); still others maintain that all the world religious truth-claims are true in the sense that adherents are understanding and experiencing Ultimate Reality through their own enculturated concepts (pluralism); and yet others maintain that there is only one true religion by which a person can be saved and that the truth-claims of the other religions are false (exclusivism) or that while one religion is privileged in some sense, yet all religions contain important elements of truth (inclusivism).

If one agrees with most of the religious adherents that the religions are, in fact, making claims which are true, then it may well be that there are certain objective criteria which can be utilized in evaluating them. One manner of doing so entails evaluating religious *systems*; that is, religions taken as reasonable systems of thought. Of course the prospect of evaluating religious systems is controversial, but nothing of much significance in religious discourse is not so! Below, I have included five criteria for evaluation which have been utilized by philosophers of religion and which are, arguably, objective, and religiously neutral.[33]

We will briefly examine each of the five.

### Logical consistency

One criterion for assessment that seems to transcend religious systems is logical consistency, and one of the basic laws of classical logic is the law of non-contradiction: a statement cannot be both true and false. While the rational undeniability of this

## CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS

1. **Logical consistency**: the fundamental, defining propositions of the religious system must be logically consistent with one another and not self-defeating.
2. **Coherence of overall system**: the fundamental, defining propositions of the religious system must be related to one another such that they offer a unified understanding of the world and one's place in it.
3. **Consistency with knowledge in other fields**: the fundamental, defining propositions of the religious system should not contradict well-established knowledge in other fields, such as science, history, psychology, and archaeology.
4. **Reasonable answers to fundamental human questions**: the religious system should be able to account for and explain fundamental human questions.
5. **Existential plausibility**: the religious system must be livable based on its own fundamental beliefs and should not require borrowing such beliefs from another religious system which contradict it.

law has been expressed for millennia,[34] various attempts to deny its role in religion have appeared from time to time. For example, Gavin D' Costa notes that Zen and Madhyamika ("Middle School") Buddhism – especially in the writings of Nagarjuna (c. 150–250 CE) – are examples of religions which hold that logical consistency doesn't apply to religious truth-claims. Nagarjuna, for example, utilized the rules of logic only to demonstrate why no logical system can ultimately be rationally affirmed. And Zen Buddhists also accept certain rules of logic to demonstrate that *satori* (enlightenment) transcends logical conceptions.[35]

However, it is not clear what is meant by the statement that reality transcends logical conception, or that logic does not apply to religious truth-claims. One must use logical concepts and rational principles of thought to even comprehend these statements themselves. Furthermore, it seems that whatever religious system one adheres to (be it the Madhyamika school or otherwise), he or she utilizes reason and logic in virtually every other area of life. Denying them in religion seems unwarranted, if not incoherent. This is especially significant regarding the fundamental, defining propositional claims of the religious systems. There could certainly be disagreement about what the fundamental claims are of any given system. But as we saw earlier, each of the major religious systems is attempting to provide propositional claims about the nature of the Real, the nature of the self, the soteriological goal, and the means for obtaining that goal. Since each of these claims is generally taken to be a non-negotiable of the system, if they contradict one another, they cannot be true.

Similarly, logic applies to each of the individual claims within a religious system. If a claim is self-defeating, then it cannot be true. For example, if a fundamental claim of a religious system is that all viewpoints are ultimately false, then that is a self-refuting claim (for it too must be false!). Some have argued that the Madhyamika school of Buddhism affirms such a view. If so, then it would be self-defeating, and thus false.



### Coherence of overall system

Not only should each of the fundamental claims of the religious system be logically consistent with the other fundamental claims and not self-defeating, but the overall system should be coherent as well. "Coherence" in this context is the idea that the fundamental claims should have an interconnectedness and systematization that is both clear and appropriate. In this vein, philosopher of religion William Wainwright notes that the claims ought to "hang together" appropriately. He uses monotheism and polytheism to make the point: "Monotheism … seems more coherent than polytheisms that posit a number of gods but don't clearly explain the connections among them."[36]

### Consistency with knowledge in other fields

Another significant criterion for assessing a religious system is its consistency with various fields of knowledge. Several important fields are history, psychology, and the hard sciences (physical sciences, life sciences, and earth sciences). If a well-established claim from one of these domains contradicts a fundamental religious belief, this should at least be cause for considering the rejection of the belief. This could also provide a defeater for the system as a whole.

For example, if a religious system claims that God created the world in a perfect state several thousand years ago, and that therefore dinosaurs could not have really existed in history, the solid evidence from archaeology should be cause for rejecting that belief. If rejection of the belief is not possible without rejection of the system as a whole, then so much the worse for the system. Of course adherents of a given religious system may find reason for holding firm to the belief despite other evidence to the contrary. The difficult task, then, is to determine whether the reason (or reasons) for maintaining the belief are more justified than the evidence to the contrary.

### Reasonable answers to fundamental human questions

A religious system should provide reasonable and adequate answers to fundamental religious questions. Such questions include: Who am I? Why am I here? What is the nature of the Real? What is the solution to the human condition? What happens after death? And so on. If the system either lacks answers to such questions or the answers are unreasonable or inadequate, this should be cause for concern. No doubt, determining whether such answers are reasonable or not is no easy task. But the process of inquiry here may be fruitful nonetheless. For example, if the answer to the question Who am I? turns out to be that I am not a substantial individual self but rather a bundle of experiences, this raises an important question of reasonableness and adequacy.[37]

### Existential plausibility

Another seemingly non-arbitrary criterion for assessing religious systems is whether the system can be lived out on its own terms or whether it must borrow ideas from another system. If one must borrow, say, *core* beliefs from another system in order to live a meaningful life, then one's own system (or the one under analysis) is probably inadequate if not false. For example, if one holds to the belief (widely held by adherents of certain pantheistic traditions) that physical pain and suffering are mere illusions, then he or she should live consistently with that belief. The scriptures of the Christian Science religion, for example, affirm that "evil is but an illusion, and it has no real basis. Evil is a false belief."[38] Adherents of Christian Science are taught not to seek medical help for this very reason – pain and evil do not exist. But one could ask whether such a view is existentially plausible. If an adherent of this religious system could not take the existential pressure to ignore medical care, for example, it may be cause for him or her to reject the system. Similarly, if persons within the system are "cheating," as it were, by secretly seeking medical care for illness, perhaps that would be reason for one analyzing the belief to reject it, if not to reject the system as a whole.

Another example is moral claims. If a religious system includes a moral position which is not existentially sustainable in one's life, it should probably be rejected. For example, if a religious system includes the claim that right and wrong are mere illusions, but then one feels the existential need to live in accordance with certain moral values, then the religious claim, if not the system as a whole, should probably be rejected.

Religions are complex systems of human thought and practice, and the "great world religions" have been lived and expressed over many centuries and millennia. The complexity of the religions makes their evaluation a difficult task indeed. But given that these religions do express themselves in propositional and meaningful form, this allows for their reasonable assessment as *systems* of thought and practice. Given their significance in the way one thinks about oneself, the nature of Ultimate Reality, and salvation/liberation, their evaluation is perhaps one of the most important human endeavors imaginable.

However, the evaluation of a religious system raises another important issue worthy of careful reflection: religious tolerance.



## RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

As we have seen, the world in which we live is flourishing with diverse perspectives about fundamental religious questions. As the world becomes more globalized, we will continue to grow in awareness of the richness and wide diversity of religious traditions (many of which are radically different from our own). If we do hold the view that religions can be evaluated – and even most pluralists would agree that some religions are worse than others (think of the American UFO religion Heaven's Gate, for example) – must religious *intolerance* follow? The answer to this question partly depends on what we mean by "tolerance" and "intolerance." If by "tolerance" we mean affirming that all traditions are equally true and "intolerance" denying that they are all equally true, then of course any evaluation would be an intolerant endeavor. However, if by "tolerance" we mean recognizing and respecting the beliefs and practices of others, then evaluation and tolerance need not be at odds.

As encounters with religious "others" become commonplace, conflicts concerning doctrinal, cultural, and practical differences will also increase. In response to this conflict, as noted at the beginning of the chapter, the Dalai Lama proposes an interreligious harmony that appreciates the value of other faith traditions. He notes that an important first step in accomplishing this harmony is developing an understanding of other faith traditions and appreciating the value inherent within each of them. In the coming decades and centuries, if we are going to flourish together as human beings, and as *religious* human beings, we must take seriously this proposal. We must advance in tolerance, and this will involve learning about religious others – what they believe and why, and how they practice their beliefs – and striving to understand. This need not entail a capitulation to an "everyone's right" attitude, but it could be argued that it should become an "everyone's significant" attitude. After all, whatever our religious convictions, we are all *homo sapiens* – all part of the great community we call "humanity."

## SUMMARY

Much territory has been covered in this chapter. We began with an overview of the growing diversity of the global religious landscape. We saw that the great religions all make claims about fundamental matters of human life and thought – claims about the self, Ultimate Reality, and the meaning and means of salvation/liberation, among others. A number of these fundamental claims contradict one another, and this raises the question of how we should philosophically approach such disagreements. We then examined six basic approaches in response to the conflicting truth-claims of the religions: atheism, agnosticism, relativism, pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism. As the first two approaches are dealt with in other chapters, we analyzed the latter four, looking at pros and cons of each of them.

We then considered the task of evaluating religious systems. We examined five criteria for such evaluation: logical consistency, coherence of the overall system, consistency with knowledge in other fields, reasonable answers to fundamental human questions, and existential plausibility. It can be argued that these criteria are religiously neutral and objective means for making such evaluations.

The task of evaluating religious systems raises the important issue of religious tolerance, for evaluation – which involves the possible conclusion that one belief or system of beliefs is true and another false – can lead to an attitude of arrogance or superiority. This need not be so. Truth and tolerance are distinct concepts, and one could be an intolerant relativist or pluralist just as one could be a tolerant exclusivist or inclusivist. With the growing awareness of religious others and the rise in co-mingling of people from various traditions, it has become increasingly more important for us to be religious learners, respecting the beliefs and practices of others who hold views very different from our own.

That is the religious challenge of the twenty-first century.



## QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW/DISCUSSION

1. Is religious truth different from scientific truth? Does it matter? Explain your answer.
2. Is it reasonable to believe that one's own religion is true in its core beliefs and other religious are false in their core beliefs while also being tolerant of those religions? Why or why not?
3. How would you describe Professor Hick's pluralistic hypothesis? Is it plausible? Do you believe it? Why?
4. Explain aspectual pluralism. What are some benefits of this view? What are some concerns about it?
5. How does religious relativism differ from religious pluralism? What are some similarities?
6. Which of the six approaches to religious diversity do you find most persuasive? Why?
7. Do you believe it is possible to compare rival religious systems in such a way that one can objectively assess their plausibility? Explain your answer.
8. The Dalai Lama has said the following: "It is unhelpful to try to argue on the basis of philosophy or metaphysics that one religion is *better* than another. The important thing is surely its *effectiveness* in individual cases" (emphasis mine). Comment on this claim.
9. If a fundamental claim of a religious system is that God created the world, including flora and fauna (plants and animals), does this contradict biological evolution in such a way that the system should be rejected? Explain your answer.
10. Can one hold to exclusivism or inclusivism and also be religiously tolerant? What would tolerance mean in these cases?

## FURTHER READING


Basinger, David (2002) *Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Assessment*. Aldershot: Ashgate. (Offers a study of the major epistemic issues concerning religious diversity.)

Byrne, Peter (1995) *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion*. New York: St. Martin's Press. (A clear analysis of philosophical consequences of religious pluralism.)

Eck, Diana L. (2002) *A New Religious America*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco. (Drawing on her work with the Pluralism Project, she notes and reflects on the explosive growth of religious traditions in America.)

Griffiths, Paul J. (2001) *Problems of Religious Diversity*. Oxford: Blackwell. (Analyzes a number of philosophical questions raised by religious diversity.)

Gyatso, Tenzin, the Dalai Lama (2001) *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World: Ethics for a New Millennium*. London: Abacus. (An important work on ethics and tolerance from a significant religious leader.)

Hick, John (2004) *An Interpretation of Religion*. 2nd ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (A classic on religious pluralism.)

Hick, John (2007) "Religious Pluralism" in Chad Meister and Paul Copan, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*. London: Routledge. (A concise presentation of pluralism by its most ardent defender.)

Knitter, Paul, ed. (2005) *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*. New York: Orbis. (Essays by Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist pluralists.)

McKim, Robert (2001) *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Focuses on themes related to divine hiddenness and religious diversity and their implications for religious belief.)
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Runzo, Joseph (2001) *Global Philosophy of Religion: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oneworld. (An exceptionally clear and insightful textbook on global philosophy of religion; Chapter 2 includes Professor Runzo's reflection on religious relativism/henofideism and pluralism.)
Smith, Huston (1991) *The World's Religions*. San Francisco, CA: Harper. (A classic overview of the major world religions.)
Ward, Keith (2007) "Truth and the Diversity of Religions" in Chad Meister, ed., *The Philosophy of Religion Reader*. London: Routledge. (A response to Hick's pluralism.)
Zagorin, Perez (2005) *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (A scholarly but readable and engaging presentation of the origins of religious toleration in the West since the Enlightenment.)

## WEBSITES

http://www.pluralism.org
The Pluralism Project at Harvard University. Headed up by Diana Eck – Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard – the goal of the Pluralism Project is "to help Americans engage with the realities of religious diversity through research, outreach, and the active dissemination of resources."

http://www.science.uva.nl/~seop/entries/religious-pluralism/
A helpful and concise entry from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on pluralism and religious diversity written by philosopher of religion David Basinger.

http://www.religionfacts.com
Religion facts. A helpful and well-documented site; contains a useful comparison chart of religions.

http://www.le.ac.uk/pluralism/centre_publications.html
Centre for the History of Religious and Political Pluralism. The aims of the Centre include facilitating the study of the history of pluralism/diversity through active research and publications and promoting understanding of pluralism/diversity.

http://www.religioustolerance.org
Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance. This informative site promotes religious freedom and diversity as positive cultural values.

http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

# 3 Conceptions of ultimate reality