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Dealing with Religious Diversity
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Abstract

This article catalogues and critically examines philosophical responses to the phenomenon of religious diversity and disagreement. In the first section I outline five possible approaches to the phenomenon of diversity and find them unconvincing. The second half focuses on relativism as a solution to the problem of religious disagreement. I argue that the relativist achieves a resolution of the initial problematic at the cost of undermining the claim that religious beliefs could be true or objective. To accept religious relativism as a solution to the problem of diversity is to deprive religion of its power to convince or persuade the non-believer. If diversity of religious belief is a fact, then the only reasonable approach we could adopt is an ethical stance of mutual tolerance and respect for such diversity.

. Religious diversity is an empirical fact which may not be open to theoretical resolution. Relativism about religion, the focus of the second half of this article, has been offered as a solution to the problem of religious disagreement. The desired resolution of the initial problematic, however, is achieved at the cost of denying that religious beliefs could be true or objective. To accept religious relativism as a solution to the problem of diversity is to deprive religion of its power to convince or persuade the non-believer. If diversity of religious belief is a fact, then the only reasonable approach is to adopt an ethical stance of mutual tolerance and respect for such diversity.

Faith and Diversity

Cultural diversity creates not only socio-political but also philosophical headaches. The Encyclopedia Britannica estimates that there are about 10,000 distinct religions of which 150 have at least 1 million or more followers. According to other methods of individuation, there are 19 major world religions subdivided into 270 large religious groups, and many smaller ones.¹ Each of these religions often professes conflicting articles of faith, metaphysical outlooks, ethical beliefs, and injunctions for religious practices². Logically speaking not all religious doctrines could be true, but the difficulty is to decide which one(s), if any, are. Faced with seemingly incompatible and competing religious beliefs there are at least five options available:³

1. Secular Atheism. Secular atheists deny the truth and validity of all religious claims and explain the prevalence of religious belief by citing the social and psychological needs of believers. From this perspective, there is no substantive problem of religious diversity because all religions are equally false and based on an explainable ‘God delusion’.⁴ This option, despite its satisfactory simplicity and its many vocal and articulate supporters among the intelligentsia, has failed to gain wide-spread support.

2. Exclusive monism. Religious exclusivism maintains, rather heroically, that only one of the many existing religions has an exclusive claim to truth and those not fully in accord with it are mistaken or misguided. Religious exclusivism is a prominent feature of the orthodox interpretations of major religions and is defended

1 See David B. Barrett, in “World Christian Encyclopedia : A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World,” Oxford University Press, (2001).

2 For the purposes of this paper religion is defined as a shared set of beliefs, values, and practices revolving around what can be loosely termed as the ‘holy’, ‘sacred’, or ‘divine’. Most religions are oriented towards some spiritual being(s) or deity with supernatural attributes who is presumed to have ultimate authority over what there is. The definition skims over major differences in the phenomena treated. For instance, within Christianity, Unitarians or Quakers have no credal commitment and hence prescribe no core beliefs. Judaism and Buddhism place emphasis on practice over belief. Mahayana Buddhism is far removed from the monotheism of Judeo Christian religions. The difficulty of finding an all encompassing definition of religion underlies the problem addressed in this paper rather than undermining it.

3 The standard framework for the discussions of this topic employs a three-fold distinction between Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism as the basic taxonomy (e.g. Hick, Quinn, Alston, Knitter, McKim, Van Inwagen). My expanded 5-fold distinction has some elements in common with Harold A. Netland, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 226-237.

4 Richard Dawkins’ popular and provocative book, *The God Delusion*, (Bantam Press, 2006) is one of the more popular expressions of such a view.

strongly by fundamentalists of all creeds. Adherents of different religions almost inevitably believe in the inherent superiority of their faith, but their partiality does not offer grounds for establishing its unique truth. The difficulty with religious exclusivism is the absence of a universally accepted criterion, evidence or experimental procedure to establish a ranking of different religious beliefs. It may be suggested that the superiority of a particular religious outlook can be established by comparing their beneficial consequences. The approach is sometimes justified by reference to Matthew 7:16 “By their fruit you shall know them”. But which ‘fruits’ are to be picked as relevant to the task of comparing different religions and what are the criteria for establishing the success of such fruit-inspection? Are we to concentrate on worldly goods or the redemption and reward awaiting the faithful in the hereafter? The ultimate goal, in many religions, is to achieve eternal salvation, rather than comfort or happiness in this transient realm. The two types of good seem incommensurable, and if the eternal trumps the worldly, as it is claimed to do, then the suggestion that we should rank religions in terms of their beneficial consequences becomes unworkable. Alternatively, it may be claimed that religions should be ranked in terms of their conceptual or theoretical superiority: we could, for instance, use criteria such as internal coherence and rational plausibility to establish the superiority of a particular religious doctrine. Such measures, however, even if successfully applied, introduce extraneous rational and prudential considerations that are alien, if not antithetical, to religious faith. In almost all religious traditions, having faith involves an element of unquestioning and hence non-rational acceptance. To rank religious beliefs in terms of internal coherence or rational plausibility flies in the face of this defining feature of faith.

3. Inclusive monism. The inclusive or liberal version of religious monism denies the import of the perceived diversity and minimises its scope; the claim is that the extent of the alleged differences between religions has either been exaggerated or misunderstood. Beyond the apparent dissimilarities there are many core similarities which unify all religions into a single overarching true message. According to one version of this approach, as explored by people such as William James, John E Smith and Ninian Smart, the essential unity of religious beliefs is located in the recurrent patterns of diverse religious systems. For instance, William James proposes that in every clearly articulated religious system there are at least three

discernible structural elements. Firstly, a vision of an Ideal, variously described as Ground, Order, Person, Divine Nothingness etc., which defines the true fulfillment of man and everything else. Secondly, a judgement which discloses in the actual world some defect or flaw that separates present life from the ideal fulfillment. Thirdly the Power—be it knowledge, a person, a divine law, a model of conduct—whose function it is to nullify the distorting effect of the flaw and unite man with the Ideal.⁵

This option dissolves the original dilemma by questioning its very premise but flies in the face of evidence for the irreconcilable differences among religions. It seems implausible to maintain, for instance, that the foundational article of faith in Christianity that Jesus is the Son of God, the Jewish belief that Jesus was a mere pretender and not the anticipated Messiah and the Moslem claim that Jesus was a indeed a messenger of God but a very human one whose message was to be superseded and perfected by the ultimate messenger, the Prophet Mohammad, are all equally true and compatible claims.⁶ Even if, following James, we accept that Christianity and Islam have significant shared structural element, the remaining doctrinal differences, for instance on the core question of the divine nature of Christ, renders the two religions doctrinally irreconcilable.

Inclusive monism is sometimes defended indirectly or implicitly by emphasising the expressive and symbolic rather than the assertoric functions of religious language. It is argued, that seemingly incompatible descriptions of God or accounts of the actions of his messengers are metaphors for a singular higher truth which can never be fully expressed by our mundane languages. One difficulty with this approach is that it leaves no scope for distinguishing between true religions and apostasies and heresies. If religious language is purely metaphorical and expressive then the messianic visions of fringe cult leaders and the orthodoxies of traditional

⁵ I owe this account {it's not really a point} in its entirety /{ or: "For this information I am indebted to"} to Patrick Masterson whose comments on an earlier draft of this article greatly advanced my thinking on this subject. Masterson believes that that a religion must have a putative rational infrastructure even though its central credal beliefs transcend this rational core. For a full account of his views see Masterson, Patrick. *The Sense of Creation*, Ashgate 2008.

⁶ There are many similar examples of irreconcilable religious diversity. Keith Yandell, for example has argued that central beliefs of major world religions, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism for instance make mutually incompatible ontological claims. See Keith E. Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 34.

faiths are equally valid expressions of the ineffable religious truth. Such a permissive conclusion, however, should not satisfy even the most liberal adherents of established religions. A possibly more promising avenue is to acknowledge that religions often are a mix of cognitive and non-cognitive or metaphorical elements, This admission complicates the picture but does not undermine the claim that religious discourse is not wholly immune from the claims of reason.⁷

Religious expressivism or non-cognitivism may appear to resolve our original dilemma by placing religion beyond the claims of rationality and truth. If religious beliefs are beyond the mundane truths of reason then there is no real conflict between seemingly contradictory religious credos. But this is a pyrrhic victory only, for the advocates of the non-rationality of faith render the practitioners of each religion prisoners of their own system of belief immune from criticism, but by the same token unable to engage in critical discourse with other religions. It leads to radical religious incommensurability that undermines the very attempt to reconcile or adjudicate between incompatible religious claims. The result is not only intellectually unsatisfactory but could also have serious political and social ramifications. Where reason and rational discourse are excluded, violence, guided by fervour and passion, finds ready entry.

4. Religious Pluralism. Inclusive monism in general, and expressivist approaches to religion in particular, have commonalities with so called ‘vertical pluralism’⁸, the philosophical approach according to which questions of truth and falsity in different domains of discourse, for instance the ethical, the scientific, the aesthetic, and the religious are distinct and should not be reduced to a single overarching idea of truth. Some versions of Fideism and the approaches to religion inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein—in so far as they see religious discourse (e.g. prayer) as a distinct language game enacted within the context of a specific form of life—belong to this variety of pluralism. Vertical religious pluralism is compatible with religious exclusivism and leaves our original dilemma untouched, for even if we accept that religious discourse has its own *sui generis* criteria of validity,

⁷ I owe this point to Dr Paul O’Grady. This paper has benefited greatly from Dr O’Grady’s careful and extensive comments on an earlier draft.

⁸ For the original version of the distinction between vertical and horizontal pluralism see Price, H. (1992) ‘Metaphysical Pluralism’ *Journal of Philosophy*, 89, 8: 387-409.

rational acceptability or even truth, leaving aside the implausibility of such a claim, we still face the original dilemma of adjudicating between incompatible religious claims without resorting to the ethnocentric claim of the superiority of a local religious belief set.

Religious pluralism can be given a stronger interpretation. Horizontal pluralism, maintains that there could be more than one correct account of how things are in any given domain. When it comes to religion, the claim is that many, if not all, religious doctrines are true and their perceived differences result from each religion tradition offering its own particular perspective on an ultimate spiritual truth or reality. Ernst Troeltsch, for instance, advocates horizontal religious pluralism when he claims that the great world religions all have equal claims to validity.⁹ John Hick also advocates a more developed version of pluralism where, drawing on the Kantian distinction between noumenal and phenomenal reality, he argues that a single religious reality is ‘differently conceived, and therefore differently experienced, and therefore differently responded to from within our several religio-cultural ways of being human’.¹⁰ The diversity of claims about the divine is explained by John Hick as an outcome of the ultimate unknowability and ineffability of God. According to Hick the ‘different “faces” of God, or different divine personae, have come about at the interface between the ineffable divine Reality and our human spiritual receptivity, a receptivity that has been variously formed within the different traditions’.¹¹

This horizontal version of religious pluralism could be understood in at least three distinct senses. Ontological religious pluralism is the view that the world is such that there are a plurality of genuine sources of religious authority and command. The position is in stark opposition to monotheism and would be rejected out of hand by many of major world religions, including Christianity, Islam and

⁹ See for instance, Troeltsch, Ernst. 1902 [1971]. *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*. Translated by David Reid. Atlanta: John Knox Press.

¹⁰ Hick, J., *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1993, p. 140

¹¹ Hick, John, ‘The Latest Vatican Statement on Christianity and Other Religions’, *New Blackfriars*, 79 (2007), p. 539.

Judaism. Epistemic religious pluralism is the view that there are different conceptions, representations and responses to the one underlying divine reality.

John Hick, I believe, advocates epistemic religious pluralism when he proposes that seemingly different religions are in effect distinct conceptions of the same transcendental reality and hence their logical incompatibility is apparent rather than real. In this version epistemic pluralism, in effect, becomes indistinguishable from inclusive liberal monism and faces the very same claim of implausibility. Hick attempts to overcome the original problem of diversity by denying that there are substantive and irreconcilable differences between varying religious claims. ‘Allah is the phenomenal Real of Islam; Brahman the phenomenal real of advaitic Hinduism. Both of them are manifestations of the same noumenal Real.’¹² He adds:

[T]he great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from 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 is taking place. These traditions accordingly are to be regarded as alternative soteriological spaces within which, ‘way’ along which, men and women can find salvation/liberation, ultimate fulfilment.¹³

Like the liberal monist, the epistemic pluralist, attempts to reconcile diverse religious claims by postulating a foundational unity in the ultimate objects of belief. In doing so, it ignores the lengths human beings are willing to go to establish the superiority of their particular brand of religious conviction, and thus fails to reflect the realities of religious belief and practice. More importantly, the solution is unconvincing because it brushes aside the irreconcilability of core religious doctrines. For instance, the beliefs surrounding Allah, the manner in which the Holy Koran characterises the one true God as a personal deity, a creator of the universe but distinct from its creation, is fundamentally at odds with the beliefs surrounding

¹² Hick, John. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. Palgrave Macmillan; 2nd revised edition (2004) p. 37

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Brahman in Advaitic Hinduism, where the concept of a personal deity does not exist and where there is no real separation between the creator and the created. It is very difficult to see how both these core religious claims could be true versions or manifestations of the same ultimate religious reality.

The ontological version of horizontal religious pluralism acknowledges the truth or legitimacy of a variety, if not all, of seemingly irreconcilable religious doctrines, but in doing so faces the standard dilemma of pluralism, namely how to understand the claim that conflicting and even contradictory beliefs could all be true? How to reconcile the claim to pluralism with the logical requirements of consistency and coherence?

As heroic measure to maintain that religious discourse, in virtue of its subject matter, can accommodate paradoxes and logical incongruities and therefore religious pluralism is not threatened by contradictions.¹⁴ The suggestion is unsatisfactory for reasons outlined in our discussion of Fideism. To allow that religion is beyond the grasp of logic and reason is to admit the legitimacy of any system of belief that claims to be based on faith or revelation. Furthermore, even if religious discourse is not bound by the usual constraints of logic, it does not follow that meta-religious discourse is also immune from the strictures of rationality. Non-believers, for instance, could not be denied the chance of discussing religion within a rational or logical framework. Even if the avowal of faith is fundamentally non-rational, it does not follow that discussions of such avowals are also non-rational. To adopt this approach would make philosophy of religion, including this paper, otiose.

Another way of dispelling the threat of incompatibility is to accept that there could be many true religions but localise their truth or rational acceptability to specific conceptual frameworks or cultural contexts. This approach, in effect,

¹⁴ The legitimacy of the classical understanding of the law of non-contradiction and its role as a precondition of intelligibility has been questioned by Paraconsistent logicians such as Graham Priest. Priest in fact believes that his version of Paraconsistent logic could be helpful in allowing the legitimacy of the role of paradoxes in illuminating religious discourse. See for instance, Priest, G. *Beyond the Limits of Thought*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2003 (originally published 1995). However, the whole area of Paraconsistent logic is too controversial to be of much assistance in clarifying the issues at hand.

collapses pluralism into relativism, an option that we will discuss in the next section.

5. Relativism. The relativist about religion believes that there is no real conflict or genuine disagreement between different religions because the truth of religious beliefs is relative to the differing social and cultural frameworks out of which they arise and within which they are embedded. Relativism, like ontological horizontal pluralism, affirms the truth of many religions but insists that their truth or acceptability is a local matter. The remainder of this paper focuses on this last of the five possible reactions to religious diversity I have sketched.

Relativism and Religion

The term ‘relativism’ has been applied to a bewildering array of doctrines and positions. At its most basic, relativism is the view that cognitive, moral or aesthetic norms and values are dependent on the social or conceptual systems that underpin them in such a way that a neutral standpoint for evaluating them is not available. Religious relativism is the claim that the truth, legitimacy and authority of religious beliefs and practices, at least partially, are a function of where they reside in their social and cultural contexts. Our judgements and beliefs take place within a social and cultural framework, against a background of personal and collective assumptions, interests and values, and even if they may not be wholly determined by their conceptual and socio-cultural contexts, they are influenced by them. Since religious beliefs, like all other beliefs, are formed and held under specific cultural and historical conditions, their evaluations should include a reference both to the believers’ and the evaluators’ cultural and historical contexts. Whichever way you look at it, there is no neutral ground for surveying various religions.

Religious relativism could also be characterized negatively, in terms of its opposition to a variety of doctrines, chief among them:

Religious realism or the view that there is a single correct religion and the truth of its doctrines are mind-independent. Religious truths are discovered and not constructed by the human mind.¹⁵

Religious monism or the view that there is only one true religion

Religious absolutism or the view that truths of religion are universal and univocal.

The idea of relativism permeates our current intellectual climate. Virtually the whole spectrum of today's philosophical debates, from ethics to epistemology and from science to religion, has responded to this heady and seemingly subversive idea. With the dissipation of the ideological conflicts of the twentieth century, relativism has come to dominate the intellectual ethos of our time. Almost simultaneously, religious discourse has become a potent force in the political arena. The coalescence of these two powerful ideas poses a variety of intellectual and social challenges.

Opinions as to the merits of religious relativism are sharply divided. On the one hand, relativism is seen as a serious threat to the survival of organized religion. Pope Benedict, for instance, warns that the West is fast moving towards a "dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires."¹⁶ Catholic theologian Roger LeBlanc thinks that the single biggest threat to the papacy is the rise of religious relativism—the rejection of the central credo of Christian faith that there is and could be only one true set of beliefs that emanate from the Holy See, whose authority can be traced directly to Jesus.¹⁷ The position of the Catholic hierarchy is mirrored not only by the practitioners of other Christian denominations but also by other religions. The webpage of Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, for instance, states:

¹⁵ See Runzo, *op cit.*, for instance.

¹⁶ In an address to the Italian Senate on May 13, 2004, then-Cardinal Ratzinger described a spiritual, cultural, and political "crisis" facing the Western world. An expanded version of this lecture published as *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam* (Basic Books, 2006), and it lays out what the Pope sees as a central task of his pontificate.

¹⁷ LeBlanc, R., *Relativism As Religion: Tracing its Historical Roots to the Modern Day Crisis* (Addison-Wesley Publishers, 1998)

Relativism is invading our society, our economy, our schools, and our homes. Society cannot flourish nor survive in an environment where everyone does what is right in his own eyes, where the situation determines actions and if the situation changes, lying or cheating is acceptable -- as long as you're not caught. Without a common foundation of truth and absolutes, our culture will become weak and fragmented.¹⁸

Similar sentiments are expressed by leading conservative Moslem clerics who brand their critics as 'relativists'. A group of conservative Iranian seminary scholars in Qomm, for instance, issued an open letter to the more liberal Ayatollah Nuri's seminary supporters, accusing them of consorting with people who argued that "right and wrong are relative" and that "even the *Emams* and the prophets were not absolute." Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi states, "The culture of tolerance and indulgence [advocated by relativism] means the disarming of society of its defense mechanism"¹⁹

At the other end of the spectrum of opinions, religious relativism, particularly in its postmodernist and Wittgensteinian manifestations, is seen as the best hope for reintroducing faith to a secular and materialist world.²⁰ John Caputo, for instance, in his commentary on Derrida's recent writings, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, claims that Derrida's philosophy opens the space for an affirmative faith to occur and be professed²¹. In *On Religion*, he explains that the deconstruction of modernity's scientific certainties and rational dogmas leads not to atheism but a situation "in which we see a certain recuperation or repetition of the *pre-metaphysical* situation of faith."²² Don Cupitt and DZ Phillips, on the other hand, rely on Wittgenstein's ideas of forms of life and the grammar of religious discourse

18 <http://www.carm.org/index.html> (Matthew J. Slick, 1996–2006), retrieved 30/05/2007.

19 Kurzmany, Charles, 'Critics Within: Islamic Scholars' Protests Against the Islamic State in Iran', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Winter 2001, 342-359, p. 354.

20 I have argued for the relativistic implications of post-modernism in general and Derrida in particular in *****, chapter 3. The same chapter also discusses the some relativistic interpretations of Wittgenstein.

21 Caputo, J, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Indiana University Press, 1997)

22 Caputo, J., *On Religion: Thinking in Action*, Routledge, 2001, p. 58.

to dispel the suggestion that objectivity, modelled after scientific rationality or even truth, are requisites of religious faith.²³

What these diametrically opposed reactions to relativism about religion have in common is their affirmation of the legitimacy of religious faith and the validity of a spiritual approach to the world. The religious relativist and the religious absolutist are united in their rejection of atheism and a naturalist understanding of the world.

Relativism takes many shapes and forms; prominent among them are cognitive relativism on the one hand and moral relativism on the other. Relativism regarding religion is frequently linked with the cognitive variety of relativism and its subdivisions of alethic, epistemic, conceptual relativisms.

Relativism about truth—alethic relativism—claims that the truth of an assertion is relative either to the beliefs, attitudes, tastes and other psychological idiosyncrasies of their utterers, or, more generally, to their social and cultural background. This social version of relativism about truth relativises the truth-value of assertions with a religious content to specific cultural or religious frameworks: what is true for a Christian believer, for instance, may not come out true for a Buddhist and vice versa. In the subjectivist version of alethic religious relativism the truth of religious beliefs is relativised to the cognitive and psychological framework of individual thinkers and actors—faith, accordingly, is seen as an expression of a private psychological states or individual preferences.

Alethic religious relativism may take one of two further forms: it could be given a broad or global scope where the truth and falsity of all beliefs, including religious beliefs, are relativised to their social, historical or cultural context; it could take a narrower scope and concern itself with the truth of religious discourse only.²⁴ In the first case, religious relativism is trivially a consequence of the broader doctrine of alethic relativism, the target of the most vocal critics of relativism, and stands or falls with it. Global alethic relativism, at least in its most straightforward

²³ See for instance Cupitt, Don, *Is Nothing Sacred?: The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion: Selected Essays* (Fordham University Press, 2002) for Cupitt's statement of radical fideism.

²⁴ It is of course possible to acknowledge, as for instance Hans Kung does, that religious belief and practice are at least partially a function of social and cultural contexts and yet there are general religious truths embedded within different cultural milieux. (I owe this point to Paul O'Grady).

formulations, is either self-defeating or devoid of the intellectual resources to convince the non-relativist. Here is why: The alethic relativist claims that:

Religious beliefs are true relative to their cultural context because

(TR) the truth of all beliefs is relative to their cultural context.

(TR) is either an absolute or a relative truth.

If (TR) is an absolute truth, then (TR) is false for there is at least one truth that is not relative to its cultural context.

If (TR) is a relative truth, then it is true only in cultural contexts where relativism is taken to be true. So, (TR) is not true for the non-relativists and hence those who oppose religious relativism have nothing to worry about, for in their absolutist or non-relativist cultural context religious beliefs are not taken to have relative truth—no belief is.

It may be suggested that what the religious absolutist fears is a change of cultural context where truth comes to be seen in a relativist light and religious relativism is made acceptable. But how is the relativist going to achieve this end and persuade the non-relativist of the superiority of his position? What measures is she going to take to ensure the triumph of a relativist cultural ethos? Relativists presumably believe that all their beliefs, including their religious beliefs, are true only relative to their social and cultural norms and that other societies have an equally valid claim to the truth of their beliefs. So the relativist has to believe that the absolutist claim is true (for them) as are the relativist claims for the relativists. The relativist is denying the possibility of genuine disagreement with the absolutist; consequently, on pain of inconsistency, she should not argue for or proselytise on behalf of relativism. The relativist may adopt a Rortyan position and claim that the non-relativist by engaging with relativism will come to prefer it to her original position. But the relativist does not have the intellectual resources for such pragmatic justification of her position; for instance she cannot argue that everyone should be a relativist because (W) the relativist's world is a better or happier place. For the truth of (W) can only be established relativistically and hence would not be convincing to the non-relativist.

Alternatively, alethic religious relativism may be treated as a local doctrine concerning the standing of religious beliefs only. The claim is that religious beliefs

are such that their ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ are relative to their cultural or social background. The approach resembles non-cognitivism in ethics and aesthetics where values are seen as expressions of personal or societal preferences, sentiments and attitudes devoid of a context free truth-evaluable content. This version of religious relativism may then be open to the approach accrued to statements of taste advocated by the so called New Age Relativists such as Max Kober who proposes a sophisticated version of truth-relativism for treating instances of disagreement where both parties may be deemed right²⁵.

Such an approach, however, should not satisfy the religiously inclined. As our discussion of Religions, almost invariably, promulgate universal and absolute truth claims. They affirm what they see as a genuine, time-less divine message or a revelation worthy of universal assent. Alethic religious relativism comes into conflict with this foundational precept of nearly all religions and hence creates a troubling dilemma: how could world religions remain true to their universalist message and yet be treated relativistically? The local alethic relativist, on the other hand, may attempt to highlight the differences between religious and other type of discourse and argue that religious beliefs, not unlike ethical and aesthetic beliefs, have an expressive rather than assertoric role. Religious truths, the argument goes, cannot be established using the objective methodology of the natural sciences, for the data used in the domain of science are empirically testable while religion is not. The response is unconvincing because it fails to acknowledge the ways in which religious doctrines stake a claim to truth and objectivity. It also faces the problems besetting the versions of inclusive monism, discussed above, the expressive and symbolic rather than the assertoric functions of religious language are emphasised

Conceptual relativists take an altogether more complicated route towards establishing relativism regarding religion. The motivating idea behind conceptual relativism is that our knowledge of the world is mediated through a language, a theory or a conceptual scheme, and there is a plurality of such mediatory schemes. The world does not come ready-made or ready-carved; rather, human beings supply the different ways of categorizing and conceptualising it.²⁶ Furthermore, it is argued

²⁵ For a discussion of New Age Relativism and faultless disagreement see

²⁶ See *****, Chapter 7, for a more detailed discussion of conceptual relativism.

that there are different ways of categorising and conceptualising the world and no point in attempting to decide which of these different conceptual perspectives is better, for such a judgement would presuppose something outside all conceptual schemes to which they could be compared, or by the standards of which they could be judged. There is no neutral vantage point for surveying and comparing various conceptual schemes. Hilary Putnam, for instance, argues: ‘We cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description’²⁷. The ‘same’ world may be described as consisting of chairs and tables or consisting of space-time regions, or particles and fields. These descriptions need not, and may not, be reducible to a single version of the world.²⁸

Religious differences result from applying a variety of possibly incompatible conceptual tools to explain a single underlying religious reality.²⁹ There is no real conflict, for instance, between the Buddhist and Christian characterisations of the divine, for each is employing a distinct but perfectly acceptable conceptual scheme to make sense of religious reality. J. Runzo, for instance, relativises the truth-value of religious beliefs, not to a culture or society but to diverse conceptual schemes. According to him, ‘the truth of any statement P depends in part, on the conceptual schema from within which P is formulated and/or assessed. He goes on to claim that ‘a conceptual relativist ... holds that, corresponding to difference of world-view, there are mutually incompatible, individually adequate, sets of conceptual schema relative truths’.³⁰

It is difficult to see how we can give substance to conceptual relativism regarding religion or even make it intelligible. Conceptual relativism, as construed in standard philosophical literature, presupposes a division between an underlying content or experiential substratum, on the one hand, and conceptual schemata or categories used for organising that common content, on the other. On the content side of the division, it is not clear whether we could make sense of the suggestion

27 Putnam, H. *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981 p. 52

28 *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 20.

29 Harrison, V. S. (2007) “Internal realism, religious pluralism and ontology”, *Philosophia* 36 (1) is one example of use of Putnam’s argument to justify religious pluralism.

30 Runzo, J., *Reason, Relativism, and God*, New York: St Martin’s Press, 1986, p. 351, and Runzo, J., “God, Commitment, and Other Faiths: Pluralism vs. Relativism”, *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988) 343-64.

that differing religious conceptual schemes give varying but equally adequate expressions of the *same* underlying reality or experience because it is difficult to see how we could give a uniform account of the underlying religious substratum. In the most common reading of scheme/content distinction are the means of categorising and organising an undifferentiated stream of sense experiences. It is difficult to see what warrant we have for assuming that there is a common experiential content underlying all religious beliefs. Atheists question the genuineness of religious experiences and the “objects” of religious belief. Religious experience is a delusion, they claim, that comes in different varieties, and the addition of the apparatus of conceptual schemes does nothing to establish its veracity. Other versions of scheme/content distinction rely on the nebulous notion of an undefined world or the Kantian ‘thing in itself’ as the content of a conceptual scheme. In this approach, the world, forever inaccessible, is simply a limit concept presupposed by the very act of knowing and is made intelligible through the imposition of conceptual scheme. Could conceptual relativism in the religious domain appeal to the ‘religious thing in itself’ as the content of religious conceptual scheme? It is difficult to see how such a move could be justified. Religious thought does not presuppose the existence of a religious reality or religious thing in itself. The atheist when accusing the believer of delusional thought does not fall into a contradiction or utter an unintelligible accusation. Furthermore, religious belief does not presuppose a Kantian limit concept in the manner envisaged by the adherents of the traditional scheme/content distinction.

On the scheme side of the division, the very suggestion that religions are conceptual schemes or categorial frameworks on par with Kantian or neo-Kantian metaphysical categories (time, space, individuals, substance, objects, etc) is open to doubt. Religious doctrines provide a complex of narratives, moral and prudential injunctions as well as frameworks of interpretation. They provide guidelines for the conduct of our lives and aim to regulate human affairs, often down to its last detail, in this life and the hereafter. Such complex systems of beliefs are far removed from the bare-bone idea of categorial frameworks and conceptual schemes proposed by Kant and further developed by the likes of Strawson and Putnam. The abstract transcendental arguments for conceptual relativism do not readily support conceptual relativism in the narrower domain of religion.

A more general criticism of conceptual relativism could be found in Davidson's famous dismissal of such dualism as the third dogma of empiricism. According to Davidson, it is difficult to make sense of the suggestion that different conceptual schemes could give rise to mutually incompatible, but individually adequate scheme relative truths. He argues: "The dominant metaphor of conceptual relativism, that of differing points of view, seems to betray an underlying paradox. Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability."³¹ According to him, any language incorporates a largely correct shared view of how things are. Communication and interpretation across various languages prove the existence of a shared and generally true view of the world. In the absence of successful communication or interpretation, however, we shall not have any criterion for ascribing beliefs to a biological entity. We can understand a language only if share a view of the world with its speakers and if we fail to communicate then we would also fail to identify the linguistic community that is supposed to be radically alien to us. This line of thought rules out the very idea of conceptual relativism, and which will include the idea of religious conceptual relativism. Davidson's generalised argument relies on a number of assumptions about the connections between truth and meaning and is open to a variety of objections;³² nevertheless the argument has particular potency when applied to religious conceptual relativism. To accept that there are differing and incompatible religious conceptual schemes we need, in the first place, to identify such schemes by picking out the characteristics common to them; yet, as Davidson would say, the assumption of commonality belies the claim of dramatic incomparability between these schemes; the acknowledgement that there is such a thing as a *religious* conceptual scheme presupposes a commonality between these supposedly divergent schemes and hence undermines the very claim that they are radically different or incompatible.

31 Davidson, D., 'On the Very Idea of Conceptual schemes'; Truth and Other Enigmas, Oxford University Press, p. 184

32 See for instance *****.

Epistemic relativism is the final variety of cognitive relativism I wish to consider. Epistemic relativists believe that there are many radically different, at times incompatible, and yet equally acceptable standards of rationality, criteria of logical validity, and ways of knowing the world.³³

Social constructionists, radical feminist epistemologists and postmodernists are some of the strongest advocates of this type of relativism. Sociologist of science Bruno Latour, for instance, maintains that scientific facts and even reality—or what we call “the world” with its objects, entities, properties and categories—are not “out there” to be discovered by scientists, rather they are constructed via interactive norm-governed processes and practices such as negotiations, interpretations and manipulation of data (as well as accidental and opportunistic developments).³⁴ Barry Barnes and David Bloor, prominent standard-bearers of epistemic relativism, state: “For the relativist there is no sense attached to the idea that some standards or beliefs are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such. Because he thinks that there are no context-free or super-cultural norms of rationality he does not see rationally and irrationally held beliefs as making up two distinct and qualitatively different classes of thing.”³⁵ The social constructionists claim that ‘knowledge is a *construct* produced by cognitive agents within social practices’ and these practices may vary across social groups.³⁶ So called factual knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is a product of socially sanctioned norms and practices and is guided by projects that are of cultural, economic, or political importance to specific interest groups.

This brand of relativism is arguable applicable to religious beliefs as much as to any other organized systems of belief or knowledge. Religion, particularly in it

33 See Boghossian P, *Fear of Knowledge*, Oxford 2006, p. 2 for this way of characterizing the problem .

34 Latour, B. (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans C. Porter, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

35 Barnes, B, and Bloor, D. ‘Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge’, in M. Hollis and S. Lukes (eds) *Relativism and Rationality*, Routledge 1982.

36 Code, L. ‘Taking Subjectivity into Account’, in L. Alcoff and E. Potter (eds.) *Feminist Epistemologies*, London: Routledge (1993), p. 15.

organised form, is a social activity with norms and procedures that are constituted and sanctioned by the activities of communities of practitioners and hence have the imprint of group thinking. Following the social constructionist approach it may seem easy to conclude that different social and conceptual conditions can lead to the construction of different religious beliefs and systems of faith. Different social forces, the claim is, present us with differing world views and methods for assessing them and evaluating the claims of religion, as in other domains, we should take into account the social and historical particularities of these claims and practices.

Epistemic relativism does overcome the problem of religious diversity by turning religion into a socio-cultural artifact. Should persons of faith accept this constructivist view of religion? It is difficult to see why they should or even how they could. If religions are recognised as mere social constructs then it would be difficult, if not impossible, for the faithful to find a way to argue against the atheist and the agnostic or to proclaim the superiority, or even the desirability, of their worldview.³⁷ Epistemic relativism about religion may indeed resolve the problem of religious diversity but the cost associated with it is too high. Relativism about religion amounts to denying a fundamental feature of most religions, the belief in the unassailable and objective truth of the core tenets of one's faith. Once this core assumption of religion has been surrendered then religious scepticism and agnosticism are soon to follow. It is a profound awareness of this danger that unites the Catholic Church and Islamic fundamentalism in their opposition to relativism. To accept religious relativism as a solution to the problem of diversity is to deprive religion of its power to convince or persuade.

In this article I have examined five possible approaches to the phenomenon of religious diversity and judged them all to be unconvincing. What other options are left? If diversity of religious belief is a fact, then the only reasonable approach is to adopt an ethical stance of mutual tolerance and respect for such diversity. This is

³⁷ Don Cupitt embraces the full consequences of going relativist all the way down. He is willing to reject the role of science as arbiter of truth and thinks it as "one human cultural activity among others." He also believe "religion cannot claim objective truth. The concept of objective truth has itself been banished. Religion can no longer be descriptive but expressive, action-guiding and symbolic." (Cupitt, *The World to Come*, p. xiv)

the position encapsulated in ‘normative religious pluralism’ where religious diversity is a desirable social and political end to be encouraged and protected by social practices and the law. . This approach accepts that questions of truth and falsity of religious beliefs are central to the practices of the faithful from different religious persuasions but emphasises the need to bracket their relevance in the social and political encounters between differing religious viewpoints. Ultimately we cannot *know* which, if any of the many existing religions is true or closest to truth. It is of course possible to hold strong beliefs about one’s religious world view; after all that is what religious faith amounts to, but in the absence of any convincing evidence or useful theoretical strategies for overcoming religious disagreement, then the only option left is to accept diversity as a genuine and irrevocable datum of religious faith and as something that should be accommodated through tolerance and openness rather than denied by resorting to religious exclusivism or relativism.