

Relativism and Religious Diversity

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Cultural diversity creates not only sociopolitical but also philosophical headaches. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* estimates that there are about ten thousand distinct religions, of which 150 have at least one million followers. According to other methods of individuation, there are nineteen major world religions subdivided into 270 large religious groups, and many smaller ones.¹ These religions often profess conflicting articles of faith, metaphysical outlooks, ethical beliefs, and injunctions for religious practices.² Logically speaking, not all religious doctrines could be true, but the difficulty is to decide which one(s), if any, are. Given seemingly incompatible and competing religious beliefs, there are at least five options available.³

Secular Atheism

Secular atheists deny the truth and validity of all religious claims and explain religions' prevalence in terms of the social and psychological needs of believers; in other words, we can maintain that all religions are equally false and based on an explainable "God delusion."⁴ This op-

tion, despite its satisfactory simplicity and its many vocal and articulate supporters among the intelligentsia, has failed to gain widespread support.

Exclusive Monism

Religious exclusivism maintains, rather heroically, that only one of the many existing religions has an exclusive claim to truth and that 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 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 its beneficial consequences. The approach is sometimes justified by reference to Matthew 7:16: "By their fruits 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 nonrational acceptance. To rank religious beliefs in terms of internal coherence or rational plausibility flies in the face of this defining feature of faith.

Inclusive Monism

The inclusive or liberal version of religious monism denies the import of the perceived diversity and minimizes its scope; the claim is that the extent of the alleged differences between religions has either been exaggerated or misunderstood. Beyond the apparent dissimilarities, many core similarities 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: first, a vision of an Ideal, variously described as Ground, Order, Person, Divine Nothingness, et cetera, which defines the true fulfillment of man and everything else; second, a judgment which discloses in the actual world some defect or flaw that separates present life from the ideal fulfillment; and third, the Power—be it knowledge, a person, a divine law, or 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 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

Inclusive monism is sometimes defended indirectly or implicitly by emphasizing 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 room for distinctions 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 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 noncognitive 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 noncognitivism 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 nonrationality 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. The result is a radical religious incommensurability that undermines the very attempt to reconcile or adjudicate between incompatible religious claims. The result not only is intellectually unsatisfactory but also could have serious political and social ramifications. Where reason and rational discourse are excluded, violence, guided by fervor and passion, finds ready entry.

Religious Pluralism

Inclusive monism in general, and expressivist approaches to religion in particular, have commonalities with so-called “vertical pluralism,” the philosophical approach according to which questions of truth and

falsity in different domains of discourse, such as the ethical, the scientific, or the religious, are distinct and should not be reduced to a single overarching idea of truth.⁸ Some versions of fideism and the approaches to religion inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein—insofar 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, 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.

Horizontal pluralism, on the other hand, 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 that 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 states that the great world religions all have equal claims to validity and that Christianity is the culmination of these equal claims.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 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 Horizontal religious pluralism acknowledges the truth or legitimacy of a variety, if not all, of seemingly irreconcilable religious doctrines, but in doing so it faces the standard dilemma of pluralism: 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? The horizontal religious pluralist faces three options.

The first option is to suggest, as Hick does, that all religions are different conceptions of the same transcendental reality and hence that their logical incompatibility is apparent rather than real. This weak form of pluralism collapses into 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: "The 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 . . . within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place. These traditions accordingly are to be regarded as alternative soteriological spaces within which men and women can find salvation, liberation and ultimate fulfilment."¹³

Like the liberal monist, the weak 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 in order 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 characterizes the one true God as a personal deity, a creator of the universe but distinct from its creation, are fundamentally at odds with the beliefs surrounding 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 second option is to maintain that religious discourse, in virtue of its subject matter, can accommodate paradoxes and logical incongruities and therefore that 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 metareligious discourse is also immune from the strictures of rationality. Nonbelievers, 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 nonrational, it does not follow that discussions of such avowals are also nonrational. To adopt this approach would make philosophy of religion, including this paper, otiose.

Third and finally, we can attempt to remove the air of incompatibility between divergent faith-based claims by adopting a strong version of pluralism which accepts that there could be many true religions but which localizes their truth or rational acceptability to specific conceptual frameworks or cultural contexts. This approach, in effect, collapses pluralism into relativism, an option that we will discuss in the next section. To recap, all versions of religious pluralism prove implausible. The vertical pluralist separates religious discourse from others but does not address the issue of religious diversity. The horizontal pluralist claim may be given a weak and strong interpretation. The weaker version, like liberal monism, proves too permissive, unable to distinguish between traditional religions and what their faithful would see as mere faddish cults. The stronger version is indistinguishable from relativism.

Relativism

The relativist about religion believes that 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 from which they arise and within which they are embedded. Relativism, like strong horizontal pluralism, affirms the truth of many religions and 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 that I have sketched.

Religious relativism is the claim that the truth, legitimacy, and authority of religious beliefs and practices, at least partially, are a function of and hence reside in their social and cultural contexts. Relativists argue that our judgments and beliefs take place within a social and cultural framework, against a background of personal and collective assumptions, interests, and values, and that even if they may not be wholly determined by their conceptual and sociocultural 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 to both the believers' and the evaluators' cultural and historical contexts. Whichever perspective is adopted, there is no neutral ground for surveying various religions.

The idea of relativism permeates our current intellectual climate. Virtually the whole spectrum of current 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 toward a "dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires."¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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 the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, for instance, states: “Relativism is invading our society, our economy, our schools, and our homes. Society cannot flourish or 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.”¹⁷

Similar sentiments are expressed by leading conservative Moslem clerics who brand their critics as “relativists.” A group of conservative Iranian seminary scholars in Qom, 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.”¹⁸

At the other end of the spectrum of opinion, religious relativism, particularly in its postmodernist and Wittgensteinian manifestations, is seen as the best hope for reintroducing faith to a secular and materialist world.¹⁹ 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 professed.²⁰ In *On Religion* he explains that the deconstruction of modernity’s scientific certainties and rational dogmas leads not to atheism but to a situation “in which we see a certain recuperation or repetition of the *pre-metaphysical* situation of faith.”²¹ Don Cupitt and D. Z. Phillips, on the other hand, rely on Wittgenstein’s ideas of forms of life and the grammar of religious discourse to dispel the suggestion that objectivity, modeled after scientific rationality or even truth, is a requisite of religious faith.²²

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. Their view is often contrasted with a purely scientific conception of the world which aims to be objective and universal in its scope. In the remainder of this paper I will focus on religious relativism and its role in overcoming the phenomenon of religious diversity.

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. Relativism is also frequently contrasted with absolutism, universalism, realism, and monism.²³ 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, and conceptual relativisms.

Relativism about truth—alethic relativism—claims that the truth of an assertion is relative either to the beliefs, attitudes, and other psychological idiosyncrasies of its utterers, or, more generally, to their social and cultural background. It relativizes 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 be true for a Buddhist, and vice versa. In the subjectivist version of alethic religious relativism, the truth of religious beliefs is relativized to the cognitive and psychological framework of individual thinkers and actors—faith, accordingly, is seen as an expression of a private psychological state 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 relativized 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 formulations, is either self-defeating or devoid of the intellectual resources to convince the nonrelativist. 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 relative, then it is true only in cultural contexts where relativism is taken to be true.

So, (TR) is not true for the nonrelativists, and hence those who oppose religious relativism have nothing to worry about, for in their absolutist or nonrelativist 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 nonrelativist of the superiority of her 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 as true (for absolutists) as are the relativist claims for relativists. The relativist is denying the possibility of genuine disagreement with the absolutist; consequently, on pain of inconsistency, she should not argue for or proselytize on behalf of relativism. The relativist may adopt a Rortyan position and claim that the nonrelativist, 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 be established only relativistically and hence would not be convincing to the nonrelativist.

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 noncognitivism in ethics and aesthetics, where values are seen as expressions of personal or societal preferences, sentiments, and attitudes devoid of truth-evaluable content. But such an approach should not satisfy the religiously inclined. Religions, almost invariably, propose universal and absolute truth claims. They affirm what they see as a genuine, timeless divine message or 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 may attempt to highlight the differences between religious and scientific or empirical discourses and argue that religious beliefs, not unlike ethical and aesthetic beliefs, have an expressive rather than an 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. Furthermore, as we shall see, there are strong parallels between relativism about religion and relativism about science which this response ignores.

Conceptual relativists take an altogether more complicated route toward 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 that

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 conceptualizing it.²⁵ Furthermore, it is argued that there are different ways of categorizing and conceptualizing the world and that there is no point in attempting to decide which of these different conceptual perspectives is better, for such a judgment 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.”²⁶ 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.²⁷

Religious differences result from applying a variety of possibly incompatible conceptual tools to explain a single underlying religious reality.²⁸ There is no real conflict, for instance, between the Buddhist and Christian characterizations of the Divine, for each is employing a distinct but perfectly acceptable conceptual scheme to make sense of religious reality. Joseph Runzo, for instance, relativizes 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.”²⁹

It is difficult to see how we can give substance to conceptual relativism 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 schemes or categories used for organizing 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 that differing

conceptual schemes give varying but equally adequate expressions of the *same* underlying reality or experience when by definition we are unable to give any account of that substratum. The Kantian “thing in itself” remains forever inaccessible; however, we can treat it as a limit concept presupposed by the very acts of knowing and experiencing. It is difficult to see what warrant we have for assuming that there is a common content underlying all religious experiences. 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. 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, and frameworks of interpretation for dealing with the world. 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 barebones idea of categorial frameworks and conceptual schemes proposed by Kant, and further developed by the likes of such thinkers as Strawson and Putnam. Furthermore, as Donald Davidson has argued, 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 states: “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.”³⁰

According to Davidson, 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 we share a view of the world with its speakers, and if we fail to communicate then we will also fail to identify the linguistic community that is supposed to be radically alien to us. Davidson's generalized argument relies on a number of assumptions about the connections between truth and meaning and is consequently open to a variety of objections;³¹ 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 the assumption of commonality belies the claim of dramatic incomparability between these schemes—as Davidson would say, the acknowledgment that there is such a thing as a religious conceptual scheme undermines the very claim that the schemes are radically different or incompatible. The abstract transcendental arguments for conceptual relativism do not readily support conceptual relativism in the narrower domain of religion.

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.³² Barry Barnes and David Bloor have become the standard-bearers of this branch of cognitive relativism. They 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."³³

Relativism about science is the most controversial and yet the most interesting instance of epistemic relativism. As indicated earlier, there are striking parallels between it and relativism about religion, for the two, despite their many differences, share comparable underlying assumptions and have a common architectonic. Relativism about science relies on a number of claims against the assumption of the objectivity of scientific beliefs. It argues against

1. Scientific realism: scientific theories are attempts to describe the one real world—a world that exists independently of human thinking—and there is a single correct description of any given aspect of that world.
2. The universality of science: genuine scientific laws apply to all times and places and are invariant.
3. A univocal scientific method: there is such a thing as a uniquely correct scientific method.
4. Context-independence: there is a sharp distinction between the context of justification of a scientific theory and the context of its discovery. The social, economic, and psychological circumstances that give rise to a scientific theory should not be confused with the methodological procedures used for justifying it.
5. Meaning invariance: scientific concepts and theoretical terms have stable and fixed meanings. They retain their meaning across theory changes.
6. Convergence: diverse and seemingly incompatible scientific views will ultimately converge into one coherent theory.
7. Scientific knowledge as cumulative: there is a steady growth in the range and depth of our knowledge in any given area of science, and progress in science is made possible by such accumulation.³⁴

The religious relativist, in parallel, argues against

- 1'. Religious realism: there is a single correct religion.³⁵
- 2'. The universality of religion: religious relativism arises out of the acknowledgment that there are many religions, each with its own distinct and equally legitimate claim to truth.
- 3'. A univocal method of salvation: there is no such thing as a unique path for achieving religious salvation.
- 4'. Context-independence: religious beliefs, like all other beliefs, arise out of particular social and historical contexts and are strongly influenced, if not formed, by these concepts.
- 5'. Meaning invariance: religious terminology has a stable and fixed meaning, and the vocabulary of the sacred and the profane manages to retain its meaning across all religions.

- 6'. Convergence. diverse and seemingly incompatible religious doctrines will ultimately converge into one coherent overarching religion.
- 7'. Religious knowledge as cumulative: each new religion complements and adds to the already existing body of religious revelation.

In addition to these antiobjectivist stands shared by relativism regarding science and religion alike, positive arguments are adduced on behalf of both types of relativism. Relativism in science has been strongly supported by sociologists of science, social constructionists, radical feminist epistemologists, and postmodernists.

Researchers in the area commonly known as “science studies,” influenced by Bruno Latour, maintain 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).³⁶ Scientific discoveries and theoretical knowledge are the products of socially sanctioned norms and practices and are guided by projects that are of cultural, economic, or political importance. The social constructionists claim that “knowledge is a *construct* produced by cognitive agents within social practices” and that these practices may vary across social groups.³⁷ This move relativizes knowledge insofar as it implies that different social and conceptual conditions can lead to the construction of different systems of knowledge. The constructionist claim, if taken seriously, would equally apply to science and religion.³⁸ Science and religion are social activities with norms and procedures that are constituted and sanctioned by the activities of communities of practitioners and hence have the imprint of group thinking. Different social forces present us with different methods, theories, and worldviews; therefore, in evaluating the claims of science or religion, we should take into account the social and historical particularities of these claims and practices.

The parallels between relativism about science and religion undermine the attempts to legitimize relativism about religion by contrasting

it with the objective domain or scientific knowledge. Religious relativism shares fundamental assumptions with, and hence is no less convincing than, relativism about science. For those who embrace relativistic views of science, relativism about religion should also seem a plausible option, but relativism about science has proven singularly unpopular among practicing scientists, not least because it trivializes the very enterprise of scientific investigation and the methodological principles involved in it.³⁹ Should persons of faith, unlike the “tough-minded” scientists, accept an emasculated view of religion? It is difficult to see why they should. If religions are recognized as mere social constructs, then it will 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.⁴⁰ Relativism about religion does manage to resolve the problem of religious diversity, but the cost associated with it is too high. To be a relativist about religion is to deny a fundamental feature of religion, the belief in the unassailable and universal truth of the core tenets of one’s faith.

In this essay I set out to examine the problem of religious diversity and disagreement. I outlined five possible approaches to the phenomenon of diversity and judged them all to be unconvincing. 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 essay, 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 nonbeliever. 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 pragmatic approach accepts that questions of truth and falsity of religious beliefs may be central to the practices of the faithful of different religious persuasions but emphasizes 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 worldview; 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, 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.

Notes

1. See David B. Barrett, in *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), § 2:1.

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 toward 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 threefold distinction between exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism as the basic taxonomy (e.g., Hick, Quinn, Alston, Knitter, McKim, Van Inwagen). My expanded fivefold distinction has some elements in common with that of Harold A. Netland, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 226–37.

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

5. I owe this account to Patrick Masterson, whose comments on an earlier draft of this essay greatly advanced my thinking on the topic. Masterson believes 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 *The Sense of Creation: Experience and the God Beyond* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008).

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

7. I owe this point to Dr Paul O’Grady. This essay 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 Huw Price, “Metaphysical Pluralism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 89, no. 8 (1992): 387–409.

9. See, for instance, Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, trans. David Reid (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1971), p. 114.

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

11. John Hick, “The Latest Vatican Statement on Christianity and Other Religions,” *New Blackfriars* 79 (2007): 539.

12. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 37.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

14. The legitimacy of the classical understanding of the law of noncontradiction 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, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). However, the whole area of Paraconsistent logic itself is too contentious to be of much value in clarifying the issues at hand.

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

16. Roger LeBlanc, *Relativism as Religion: Tracing Its Historical Roots to the Modern Day Crisis* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1998).

17. Matt Slick, "What Is Relativism?," 1995, <http://carm.org/what-relativism>.

18. Charles Kurzmany, "Critics Within: Islamic Scholars' Protests against the Islamic State in Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 15, no. 2 (2001): 354.

19. I have argued for the relativistic implications of postmodernism in general and Derrida in particular in my *Relativism* (London: Routledge, 2004), ch. 3. The same chapter also discusses some relativistic interpretations of Wittgenstein.

20. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

21. John D. Caputo, *On Religion, Thinking in Action* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 58.

22. See Don Cupitt, *Is Nothing Sacred? The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion: Selected Essays* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), for Cupitt's statement of radical fideism. See also D. Z. Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

23. On absolutism, see, for instance, David Bloor's "Epistemic Grace, Antirelativism as Theology in Disguise," *Common Knowledge* 13, nos. 2–3 (2007): 250–80.

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

25. See Baghramian, *Relativism*, ch. 7, for a more detailed discussion of conceptual relativism.

26. Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 52.

27. Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 20.

28. V. S. Harrison, "Internal Realism, Religious Pluralism and Ontology," *Philosophia* 36, no. 1 (2007), is one example of use of Putnam's argument to justify religious pluralism.

29. Joseph Runzo, *Reason, Relativism, and God* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 351; see also Runzo's "God, Commitment, and Other Faiths: Pluralism vs. Relativism," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988): 343–64.

30. Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Enquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 184.

31. See, for instance, Maria Baghramian, *Relativism* (London: Routledge, 2004).

32. See Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 2, for this way of characterizing the problem.

33. Barry Barnes and David Bloor, "Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge," in *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. M. Hollis and S. Lukes (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), pp. 21–47.

34. See Maria Baghramian, "Relativism about Science," in *Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Science*, ed. Stathis Psillos and Martin Curd (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 236–48, for a detailed discussion of relativism about science.

35. See, for instance, Runzo, *Reason, Relativism*.

36. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

37. Lorraine Code, "Taking Subjectivity into Account," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 15.

38. Similar points apply to other advocates of relativism about science, radical feminist epistemologists and postmodernists. The considerations they introduce in support of a relativistic understanding of science are easily translated to religious beliefs and dogma. Feminine knowledge, the claim goes, has its own justificatory sphere, as does masculine knowledge; scientific knowledge is thus relativized to gender, which in turn is a socially constructed, rather than natural, category.

39. See Alan Sokal, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," in *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science*, ed. Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont (London: Profile Books, 1998), for a scientist's reaction to postmodern relativism about science.

40. 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 of it as "one human cultural activity among others." He also believes "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." Don Cupitt, *The World to Come* (London: SCM, 1982), p. xiv.