

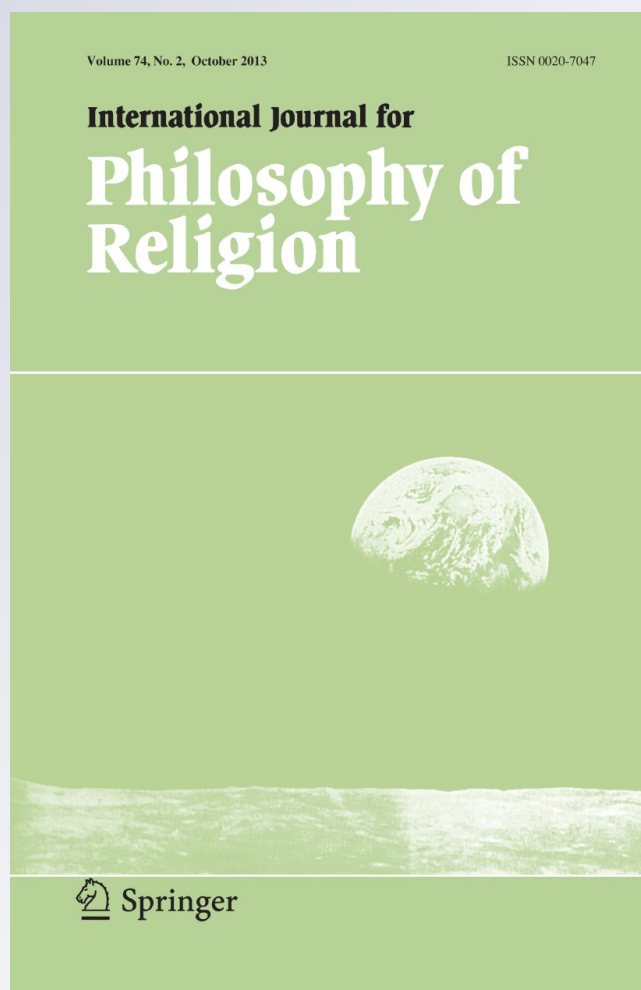
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Nicholas of Cusa's *De pace fidei* and the meta-exclusivism of religious pluralism

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Abstract In response to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Nicholas of Cusa wrote *De pace fidei* defending a commitment to religious tolerance on the basis of the notion that all diverse rites are but manifestations of one true religion. Drawing on a discussion of why Nicholas of Cusa is unable to square the two objectives of arguing for pluralistic tolerance and explaining the contents of the one true faith, we outline why theological pluralism is compromised by its own meta-exclusivism.

Keywords Nicholas of Cusa · Religious pluralism · Religious exclusivism · Orthodoxy · Orthopraxy

1

Disagreements between religious exclusivists and pluralists range across a variety of issues. They may disagree over the question of how one should take religious diversity to affect the epistemic status of one's religious beliefs, or over questions about the soteriological efficacy of divergent beliefs and practices, or over the practical challenges of orthopraxis. However, behind each of these disagreements, there is a purely cognitive question as to whether there is one truth of the matter—one right answer—or many broadly acceptable answers. Framed in this way, the issue upon which religious

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exclusivists and pluralists disagree is whether two or more *prima facie* mutually inconsistent theologies or religious practices can each be acceptable.

In the most basic sense, the exclusivist holds that theological truths, like truths about mundane things, cannot bear contradiction. For the exclusivist, even if the bedrock of religious doctrine is a faith that is grounded beyond the limits of human reason alone, the doctrines that follow from the grounding principles of faith are generally understood to form an internally consistent, logically coherent religion. The religious pluralist, on the other hand, holds that what may be (or may *seem* to be) inconsistent doctrines are, in fact, acceptable. Thus, the virtues of pluralistic theologies are typically assumed to be shouldered by practical as opposed to theoretical commitments in that pluralists are typically regarded as emphasizing religious commitments to respect the views of others, even at the cost of—in the eyes of the exclusivist, anyway—being soft on the epistemic demand that religion speak authoritatively and in the same manner for all people. Put differently, the pluralist may tend to regard exclusivism as harboring ethical and political dispositions of intolerance, whereas the exclusivist may hold that religious pluralism, in insisting on the legitimacy of a wide variety of religious doctrines, undoes the vital chord between the ethico-political commitments of religion, to say nothing of the conviction that they are revelatory of reality.¹

Given the appeal of and drawbacks to both sides, it is not surprising that there have been attempts to capture the seriousness and devotion that is associated with exclusivism without sacrificing the tolerance and humility of pluralism. Nicholas of Cusa's *De pace fidei* is one such synthetic strategy. Specifically, as we will discuss in detail below, Nicholas attempts, on the one hand, to advocate and promote peace through interreligious dialogue but, on the other hand, also shows that the very possibility of such seemingly pluralist practices presupposes the fact that all diverse rights are mere signs of the fundamental truth of a single, universal religion. Thus, Nicholas is a theological exclusivist who attempts to accommodate a degree of religious pluralism on behalf of the practical aim of promoting interreligious toleration. We hold that this synthetic approach illustrates two lessons. First, Nicholas' project will illustrate why pluralism's ethico-political aims generally entail a tacit form of theological exclusivism. We call this the problem of *meta-exclusivism*. Second, because even the pluralistic elements of Nicholas' theology seem ironically undermined by tendencies toward the intolerance and intellectual hubris that pluralism associates with exclusivism, investigating his philosophy of religion will also show why the meta-exclusivism of religious pluralism threatens to undermine theological pluralism's pursuit of "tolerance."

We should point out explicitly at the outset, then, that this paper offers a critique of pluralistic theologies that is illustrated by reference to Nicholas of Cusa's theological writings. However, we do not want our criticism of theological pluralism to be mistaken as a critique of other varieties of pluralistic philosophies—though we may have reservations about other forms of pluralism as well. Additionally, we do not want our criticism of theological pluralism to be mistaken for an advocacy of theological exclusivism. It may be the case—ironic as it may seem—that some varieties of theological exclusivism offer a better means of shouldering commitments to respect or

¹ Ruzno (1988, p. 355) observes that pluralism amounts to skepticism. Relatedly, see Clark (1997) and Craig (2007).

toleration of religious diversity than any forms of theological pluralism do. But we aren't fundamentally concerned here to make a case for such a claim, nor will we take up the question of whether and how it might be possible for exclusivist theologies to avoid the risk of slipping into what we regard as politically pathological varieties of religious fundamentalism. So, in short, our criticism of pluralistic theologies comes down to this: we do not think that pluralistic theologies are consistently able to shoulder their practical commitments to toleration or respect for religious diversity on the basis of their pluralism.

2

We will begin with a discussion of Nicholas of Cusa's synthetic program. Nicholas occupies what some commentators have described as an epochal threshold between the medieval period and the modern period and is often referred to (by Cusanus scholars, at any rate) as the last of the medievals and the first of the moderns.² Among other concerns, he was frequently occupied with the question of the political consequences and metaphysical underpinnings of religious diversity. One of his most important works in this regard, the *De pace fidei*, was composed precisely to address these issues by responding to the fall of Constantinople to Mehmed II on May 29, 1453.

The news of the Turkish conquest and reports of their atrocities began to reach the ears of Europeans over the following months. It revived the crusading spirit of previous centuries and its accompanying rhetoric of Islam's diabolic nature. Nicholas of Cusa, however, who had himself spent two months in Constantinople a little more than fifteen years prior to the Turkish conquest, offered a perspective in *De pace fidei* that represents a rare voice calling for peace between the world religions in the face of events that tended to promote only the opposite. He begins the *De pace fidei*:

After the brutal deeds recently committed by the Turkish ruler at Constantinople were reported to a certain man, who had once seen the sites of those regions, he was inflamed by a zeal for God; with many sighs he implored the Creator of all things that in his mercy he restrain the persecution, raging more than ever because of different religious rites.³

With this lamentation in mind, Nicholas offers a discussion that takes place at an "intellectual height" (1.2)—or, as he puts it later, in "the heaven of reason" (*in caelo*

² The question of Nicholas of Cusa's modernity has been a perennial focus of debate. See Hopkins (2002). For discussions of Nicholas of Cusa and the various roles he played in the history of philosophy and the Roman Catholic Church, see especially Meuthen (2012) and Watanabe (2011).

³ § 1.1. Unless otherwise noted, all cited translations of the *De pace fidei* are from the text provided in *Nicholas of Cusa on Interreligious Harmony*, ed. and trans. Biechler and Bond (1990). Citations will provide chapter and paragraph numbers reproduced by Biechler and Bond from Volume 7 of Hoffman, E. & Kilbansky, R. (Eds.) *Nicolai de Cusa Opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis* (1932-present).

rationis) (19.68)—between the Incarnate Word (*Verbum / Logos*⁴) or Peter or Paul and several earthly “intellectual powers” (1.2) representing diverse provincial customs. In all, there are seventeen representatives: a Greek, an Italian, an Arab, an Indian, a Chaldean, a Jew, a Scythian, a Frenchman, a Persian, a Syrian, a Spaniard, a German, a Tartar, an Armenian, a Bohemian, an Englishman, and, although he only speaks one sentence in the entire *De pace fidei*, Nicholas even includes a Turk (see 14.47).

Throughout this discussion, Nicholas reinforces the thesis that “a single easy concord can be found and through it constituted in religion a perpetual peace by appropriate and true means.”⁵ Specifically, the “appropriate and true means” Nicholas proposes requires the recognition by “all who are vigorous in intellect [that] there is one religion and worship, which is presupposed in all the diversity of rites” (6.16). So long as there are enlightened rulers and an insistence on dialogue between these wise representatives of the diverse religions, peace can be lasting. Further, “since truth is one and since it is not possible that it not be understood by every free intellect, all diversity of religions⁶ will be led to one orthodox faith” (3.8).⁷

In this claim, Nicholas draws upon the shared theological underpinnings of both religious exclusivism and religious pluralism. That is, in holding that “all diversity of religions will be led to one orthodox faith,” Nicholas insists that we owe theological respect to all of the varied historical rites, because their very purpose in the world presupposes dependence on a singular true faith in which they all partake. Consequently, Nicholas offers, on the one hand, a pluralistic call for mutual respect and dialogue between the representatives of the world’s religions on the basis of their participation in the singular faith. But, on the other hand, Nicholas, in noting that the one true religion is presupposed in the diversity of rites, holds that each religion, though seemingly inconsistent with its competitors, is right in its own unique way of relating its practitioners to the one true religion. Furthermore, Nicholas weds the justification for pluralism to a presupposition that all of the diverse rites necessarily aim implicitly at the same shared good or goods. It is easy to see why this brand of pluralism slips back

⁴ In *De pace fidei*, Nicholas typically signifies Christ with *Verbum*. But in 10.27, for instance, Nicholas makes explicit the notion that, in this sense, *Verbum* should be understood as identical to *Logos*: “Reason, which is the *Logos* or Word, emanates from that which speaks it so that when the Omnipotent speaks the Word, those things which are enfolded in the Word are made in reality...” (*ratio autem quae < logos > seo verbum, a proferente emanate ut, cum Omnipotens Verbum profert, facta sint ea in re quae in Verbo complicantur*).

⁵ 1.1, our translation. Biechler and Bond have “a single easy harmony could be found and through it a lasting peace established.” The translations are drawn from the last two clauses of the following sentence: *Accidit ut post dies aliquot, forte ex diuturna continuata mediatione, visio quaedam eidem zeloso manifestaretur, ex qua elicuit quod paucorum sapientum omnium talium ediversitatum quae in religionibus per orbem observantur peritita pollentium unam posse facilem quondam concordantiam reperiri, ac per eam in religione perpetuam pacem convenienti ac veraci medio constitui*.

⁶ It should be noted that Nicholas’ use of the term “religions” (*religiones*) in this sentence is not strictly consistent with the argument that he develops in the *De pace fidei*. As is clear from the quotation from section 6.16, for Nicholas, only one religion is presupposed in diverse rites (*una est religio et cultus... quae in omni diversitate rituum praesupponitur*).

⁷ In relation to the rhetorical strategies of the *De pace fidei* and other works, James E. Biechler has offered several discussions of Nicholas’ reliance on a conception of the ecumenical methods of “manuduction” (leading by the hand) and *interpretatio pia*. See esp. Biechler (1991) and (2004).

into an exclusivist articulation (and we will show explicitly how this is so later), but this is also what makes Nicholas so useful for illustrating why this might be the case for religious pluralisms generally.

One instance of Nicholas's pluralist aims in *De pace fidei* is Paul's conversation with the Tartar, the Bohemian, and the Englishman on issues such as rites of circumcision and the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Marriage. In each of these episodes, it is clearly allowed that if diverse rites are understood as merely temporal manifestations of a transcendent but unified faith, then these signs must be understood as subject to change (see esp. 16.55, 16.60, 18.66, 19.67). As a result, "to seek exact conformity in all things is rather to disturb the peace" (19.67) and, therefore, diverse rites should be mutually "tolerated" (*tolerando*) *on behalf of peace* (16.60). Nevertheless, in stark contrast with the cases mentioned above, in Paul's exchange with the Armenian, Nicholas also maintains that there are certain sacramental rites such as baptism that are so closely aligned with the true faith that any adult who can receive them cannot be called faithful if he or she refuses them (17.62).

Subtending *both* Nicholas' call for toleration regarding the diversity of rites and his occasional insistence on the necessity of conforming to specific rites is an implicit understanding that all rites without qualification are to be maintained only insofar as they reflect the same transcendent faith corresponding with the one true religion. And that religion is Christianity. Caution is in order on this point, though. Nicholas does *not* insist that any specific worldly manifestation of Christianity is or even could be a fully realized instantiation of the one, true faith. Rather, Nicholas maintains that an *ideal* Christianity is the only true religion because only its absolute recognition of the necessity of Incarnation, the Trinity, the possibility of resurrection, and the call to charity could be consistent with what he takes to be the presupposed grounds for any religious rites whatsoever. For Nicholas, Christianity isn't the best religion just because he's a Christian. Rather, ideal Christianity is, metaphysically speaking, the *only* religion, and all of the diverse, finite rites of mundane religions (including his own Catholicism) must be measured according to this ideal universal religion.

We should also note that there is a significant difference between one who holds that there is one true religion and one who holds *both* that there is one true religion *and* that it is *her own*. In the first case, the person holding this view may be a pluralist to the extent that she may hold that the competing rites are all correct about the one true religion in their own way (we will address in the next section whether this is, in the end, a consistent view). In the second case, however, thoroughgoing pluralism is not an option, since the truth of the subject's home religion is inconsistent with that of the other faiths. Nicholas holds that Christianity is the true religion (both in orthodoxy and orthopraxis), and so seems to be inhabiting the second option above. That is, Nicholas' view is that, though he is a Christian, the true Christianity is not *his own*, but an *ideal Christianity*, one that he can sketch only in outline and defend only from the standpoint of a mystical, negative theology.⁸ Consequently, as in the first option above, Nicholas extends participation in this ideal form of Christianity well beyond

⁸ To be sure Nicholas holds that revealed doctrines, being "divine truths," serve as the standard of truth in comparative religion. The issue, in this context, is determining which elements of revelation are the ones of the true religion, and which are contextually addressed to the various forms of that religion.

recognized popular conceptions of Christian orthodoxy.⁹ This, he reasons, constitutes the basis for religious toleration and interreligious dialogue. Thus, for Nicholas, the practical aims that are usually associated with religious pluralism are grounded instead in a form of theological exclusivism.

3

Despite Nicholas' intention to argue for a toleration of particular religious rites that might bring humans closer to an ideal and universally binding Christianity, Nicholas himself is not always the model of toleration that the preceding analysis suggests that he might be. For instance, in the *De pace fidei*, when the Persian points out that "it will be more difficult to bring the Jews than others to this belief for they admit nothing expressly about Christ," Peter simply responds:

[T]hey have all these things in their scriptures about Christ; but following the literal sense they [refuse] to understand (*intelligere nolunt*). Nevertheless, this resistance of the Jews will not impede concord. For they are few and will not be able by arms to disturb the whole world. (12.41, our emendation)

Moreover, the broader conciliatory tone of the *De pace fidei* is not entirely matched in other works. For instance, in the *Cribratio Alkorani*, a work completed just seven or eight years after the *De pace fidei*, Nicholas writes:

O Muhammad, ... you reduce all [matters] to the sword; and even by the sword you strive to obtain tribute.... Does anyone fail to understand that the goal of your religion—that your zeal and the rite [prescribed] by your law—tends only toward your dominating?¹⁰

In fact, not only does Nicholas blame Muhammad for many doctrinal errors in the Qur'ān, but he also insists on attributing other errors in the Qur'ān to Jews!

Now you see, O Calif, that you [Muslims] have been led astray by cunning and perverse Jews who were blasphemers of God...[T]hey inserted those [statements] about Abraham (whose descendants they pride themselves on being) and many other [statements,] which remained in the Koran in that form.¹¹

⁹ For Nicholas, negative theology results only in awareness of the chasm between human knowledge and divine truths. This is precisely "learned ignorance," a form of mysticism. Nicholas holds in *De visione Dei*: "I see you, O Lord my God, in a certain mental rapture, because if sight is not satisfied by seeing, nor the ear by hearing, then even less is the intellect satisfied by understanding" (Bond 1997, § 16.70).

¹⁰ In *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, vol. 2, 2nd edition, (Bo97, III.8.184), emendations in Hopkins' translation.

¹¹ III.18.228, emendations in Hopkins' translation; see also second prologue, § 12. With regard to Nicholas' apparent intention to address the "calif of Baghdad" in this portion of the *Cribratio Alkorani*, note that portions of the *Cribratio Alkorani* are composed in the mode of direct address to various hypothetical interlocutors: Muhammad himself, all Arabs, Mehmed II, etc. In this case, Nicholas is addressing the Calif of Baghdad, though he was in error if he believed that there was such a calif in his own day. Further discussion of Nicholas' attitudes towards Judaism and Islam can be found in the following sources: Burgevin (1969); Izbicki (2004), and Rescher (1965).

In light of expressions such as this, we should be careful to consider what “toleration” might mean for Nicholas of Cusa. Jos Decorte has argued that Nicholas

creates room for tolerance, not in its modern, ‘flimsy’ meaning of ‘let everyone think and say what they want, and I am not interested in anyone as long as they are not bothering me.’ That is a tolerance of coldness or *indifference*. However, Nicolas argues for a more substantial meaning that is twofold. ‘Tolerance’ is from the Latin *tolerare* (bear or endure), and means first of all that we endure the burden that comes from the other and his otherness, that we *bear* it. However, ‘tolerance’ is also related to the Latin *tollere* (lifting, carrying up), and therefore means that we take the burden that bears down on the other and hinders us, from his shoulders and carry it up ourselves, in the sense that we take it *somewhere*. That is the tolerance of humanity, of the confrontation in dialogue and in reply, which Nicholas (and Juan de Segovia) calls *contraference* (2004, pp. 115–116).

However, in light of the lines cited above from the *Cribratio Alkorani*, it should not come as a surprise to note that *tollere* can also be translated as “to remove” or “to carry away” and so may suggest that “toleration” is what one does with those whom one would prefer to see converted to the acceptance of one’s own doctrines. Indeed, it is worth noting how Biechler and Bond render the Arab’s response to the Word’s suggestion that it should be easy to encourage polytheists to recognize that they implicitly worship a single deity “in all whom they call gods.” The Arab’s response is “*Forte hoc non foret difficile, sed tollere culturam deorum erit grave,*” which Biechler and Bond translate as “Perhaps this will not be difficult, but *to remove* the worship of gods would be a grave matter” (6.18, our emphasis). Jasper Hopkins also translates *tollere* in this way; he renders the sentence: “Perhaps this [*dissolution*] might not be difficult [to effect]. But it will be hard *to eliminate* the worshipping of gods.”¹² Without wishing to offer an adjudication on how to translate either the term *tollere* or *tolerare*, our own view—a view that we will highlight below—is that what appears to us to be an ambivalence in Nicholas’ very term might also reveal an ambivalence within pluralism’s appeal to “toleration.”

In the case of Nicholas’ terms *tollere* and *tolerare*, one possible way of accounting for the ambivalence within the *De pace fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani*’s notion of “toleration” might simply be to note that “toleration” is something that the religious exclusivist does out of expediency, whereas for the thoroughgoing pluralist, “toleration” stems from conviction. The problem, again, is pinning down how the pluralist theological conviction actually yields practical toleration. It is telling that, for Nicholas, the Jews, who “are few and will not be able by arms to disturb the whole world,” do not seem to receive even the modest respect afforded to Muslims in either the *De pace fidei* or the *Cribratio Alkorani*. In fact, considering the events of 1453, the Turks in particular had, from Nicholas’ point of view, amply proven their ability to “trouble the world by force of arms.” And so, perhaps “tolerance,” for Nicholas, may simply be the most expedient and practical means of dealing with the problem posed by the inconsistent demand, on the one hand, to spread Christianity (a demand that would

¹² In *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, vol. 1, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1994), emendations in Hopkins’ translation, our emphases.

naturally bring Muslims and Christians into conflict) and, on the other hand, what would otherwise appear to be a pluralistic impulse to respect all rites as immanent manifestations of the one true religion. Indeed, in response to a letter from Juan de Segovia in 1454 laying out both *practical* and *theological* reasons why dialogue rather than force would be the most effective way of dealing with the reality of religious conflicts, Nicholas replied telling his interlocutor about his own *De pace fidei*. And, as Biechler notes, he also offered “enthusiastic support” and suggested “a practical addition to Segovia’s proposal,” recommending that the Christian side of any interreligious conferences “be placed in the hands of influential laymen rather than priests because, he said, the Turks would prefer these.”¹³

In addition to this ambivalence within his understanding of “tolerance,” Nicholas’ invectives also point to a peculiar reason why genuine pluralism is in tension with what seems to be the obvious exclusivist overtones of many varieties of revealed religions. This peculiarity is especially evident in the fact that, in the *De pace fidei*, it is not the “simple” Tartars who are most chastised nor is it the polytheistic Hindus. Religious tolerance is easy to extend to them (at least within the fictional space Nicholas invents for inter-religious dialog). Their own presuppositions given to them by *their* revealed mythologies of various gods and goddesses are not avowedly opposed to Christian theology, and so Nicholas regards them as more willing to be led from their ignorance to the underlying truth. But for Jews and Muslims, to whom the faith of Abraham has also been revealed, the fact that there remains any reluctance to convert cannot be attributed merely to ignorance. For Nicholas, this reluctance must be understood as the consequence of a *willful* refusal to pursue the true intellectual Good promised in the one, true worship. Such a refusal, in short, is easily interpreted by a Christian as the expression of Judaism’s and Islam’s fundamental religious failures and, hence, *their* intolerance and failure of reciprocity. That is, the pluralist Christian view is to see what is true in their religions, and now it is up to the Jew and Muslim to see what is true in Christianity. Their failure to do so is indicative of how their religions must have antecedently poisoned their own implicit grasp of the truth that their faith expresses. Even worse, as Nicholas sees it, this refusal “walks in accordance with the conditions of the sensible life which is from nowhere else but the world of the Prince of Darkness” (2.7). And, predictably, the result of walking such a path would be an eternal death in which, as Nicholas puts it in his most famous work, *De docta ignorantia*,

the intellectual soul in its own manner is forever tormented by fire. The manner of its torment is not understandable to us otherwise than as that of one who has been deprived not only of vital nourishment and health but also of any hope of ever attaining them, so that, without extinction and without end, this one is forever dying in agony. (Bond 1997: III. 10,242)

¹³ “A New Face toward Islam: Nicholas of Cusa and John of Segovia,” 200. Excerpts from Juan de Segovia’s letter and Nicholas’ full response can be found in *De pace fidei cum epistula ad Ioannem de Segobia*, vol. 7 of the *Opera omnia* of Nicholas of Cusa. For a summary of the chapter headings of his letter to Nicholas of Cusa, see also *Documents of the Later Crusades, 1274–1580*, trans. Norman Housley (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), pp. 144–147. For further discussion of this relationship, see Wolf (2008), (2005) and (2003).

Let us bracket both Nicholas' polemical statements and his ecumenical commitments so that we might evaluate the core philosophical merits and demerits of the *De pace fidei*. Even if his ultimate view on Jewish salvation seems trenchantly intolerant (and for this reason contrary to the practical aims that are generally espoused by religious pluralists and contrary to what seems even his own stated goals), there is nevertheless something admirable and surprising in any late-fifteenth century Christian writer being able to go as far as Nicholas of Cusa does in calling for interreligious dialog with Muslims. Biechler notes that, "what makes [Nicholas's] positive and irenic approach... unique is that [it was] conceived and articulated within an atmosphere of supercharged anti-Muslim polemic designed to stir up support for a crusade to recapture Constantinople" (1991, pp. 200–201). And yet, while we do not want to lose sight of the worthiness of the moral intention to engage in dialogue with those who do not share our commitments, we do want to question whether this intention is in fact entailed by or even consistent with the internal logic of pluralistic theologies.

As we have shown above, Nicholas's objective was to sketch a form of Christian pluralist theology that demanded "tolerance" of diverse rites. This agenda thus seemed generally (though not categorically) to support the kinds of practical aims espoused by religious pluralists, but maintained the core elements of his faith as not only correct, but of prime place to interpret competing theologies. Hence, on our reading, Nicholas offers a theologically Christian argument that illustrates the tacit exclusivism that may be required to sustain religious pluralism's practical ambitions. In Nicholas' case it is easy to see that the pluralist impulse depends upon a presupposed exclusivist theological explanation for the acceptability of alternate theologies. For us this means that Nicholas's project—exclusivist though it is—illustrates why pluralist arguments implicitly require a similar aspect shift. To be specific, what Nicholas' project seems to illustrate are the two competing impulses harbored within pluralistic theology: (1) from the practical perspective, all the various faiths are on a theological flatland, of sorts, since they each bear in their own unique ways on the divine; (2) however, at the same time, from the explanatory perspective, only the metaphysical commitments of one theology can accommodate the first perspective. As a consequence, Nicholas' project helps us see why, for pluralism to be true, one theology must be right in a way that subtends and is the implicit justification for "tolerating" other forms of worship.¹⁴ And this might also explain why one of the consequences of the pluralistic impulse, ironically, is that the pluralist tends to regard her closest theological kin as her most dangerous adversaries.

In the concluding sections of this paper, we will turn to a direct examination of contemporary versions of pluralist theology. However, in order to ascertain more precisely how Nicholas of Cusa's project illustrates intrinsic difficulties for pluralistic theologies, it will be worth briefly considering the merits of his projects on their own terms. The most important question in this context is whether Nicholas' attempt to accommodate certain pluralistic features within his exclusivist theology is valid. It seems a contradiction to say that, because all views are correct, one is uniquely

¹⁴ Nicholas might put it this way instead: all rites express something true, but *ideal* Christianity is the maximal manifestation of this truth. Finite rites associated with Christianity are generally better approximations of ideal Christianity than are the finite rites associated with other manifestations of the one true religion.

correct in a way that the others are not—or that, because Christian theology is correct about the metaphysics of the divine, all faiths are also right. The conflict can be captured by noting the inconsistency in maintaining that if, say, Olympianism is right, then it is right about the explanatory metaphysics of polytheism in a way that rubs against the truth of monotheism as well. In light of this, one defending Nicholas may make the case for consistency as follows: when one holds that the rites of religion X are correct in a pluralistic way, one is reformulating or reconstructing X in light of the metaphysics on the basis of which one holds one's pluralism. This is to say that for every theological commitment, there are further con-commitments that come along with them. These con-commitments are ones that regulate the semantics of the first-order commitments. And so, when one believes a cosmological myth, there is a con-commitment that comes with the myth to take it as an explanatory story. How pluralisms reconstruct these commitments is to leave the first-order beliefs and practices alone, but change the second-order take on what those commitments mean. For example, on a humanistic reading of Nicholas' pluralism, "right" when applied to any theology or temporal rite would mean "theologically appropriate for the circumstances of its inception." And so as a consequence, because the various rites arose under differing circumstances, they will have different contents even while they refer to a single presupposed ground for their legitimacy. Alternately, on a strictly Christian reading of Nicholas' pluralism, the various rites are historically and geographically distinct manifestations of deeper norms of charity or insights about the necessity of Incarnation and the possibility of Resurrection. Consequently, the diverse rites all bear on the central values of Christianity, but they do so from their limited purviews. They are right, but not right *synoptically*. Thus, Nicholas is able to maintain that, although no one "can attain maximum faith... nor likewise can anyone attain maximum love" (*De docta ignorantia* III.12.254), nonetheless, "whatever Christ Jesus merited in his passion those who are one with him also merited, but different degrees of merit are preserved, according to the different degree of each one's union with Christ through faith formed by love" (*De docta ignorantia* III.6.219). Nicholas of Cusa's overriding tendency, then, is to accept various religious rites and theologies, but he reformulates the way they are to be understood. They are reconstructed from above.

4

In the preceding analysis, we've shown how Nicholas attempts to synthesize exclusivist and pluralist theological commitments, but the tension of his synthetic ambition is resolved, in the end, by jettisoning one of these views. This is because although one may still say that *prima facie* inconsistent religions X and Y are both true, one does this by revising their contents in light of the preferred truths of either one of the competing religions or some third hidden religion. This is a form of exclusivism—an exclusivism that accommodates the virtues and benefits of other religions (one might say, a *cosmopolitan exclusivism*), but it is an exclusivism on the second-order nonetheless. This, then, is a sketch of what we call the *meta-exclusivism* of theological pluralism.

We now want to examine the core of the meta-exclusivism problem in light of contemporary discussions of religious pluralism. The meta-exclusivism objection has been leveled in a variety of ways against pluralists, and the most regular target for the criticism recently has been John Hick. There are two main forms the argument takes. The first is the *revisionism argument*, and the second is the *exclusivism of pluralism argument*. Let us take revisionism first. Hick's pluralism resembles Nicholas' theology insofar as Hick also requires that one take a second-order view on religious practices. In Hick's case, the second order view is posited on a Kantian distinction between phenomenal and noumenal realities, and so the diverse theologies and competing rites are *phenomenal* responses to a single *noumenal* reality.

[T]he noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of gods and absolutes which the phenomenology of religion reports.... [They] are not illusory, but are empirically, that is experientially, real as authentic manifestations of the Real. (1989, p. 242)

On the phenomenal level, the various theologies are explanatory stories that make sense of the world and practitioners' lives as given, but on the noumenal level, their variety has a single core source. So as a consequence the religions are interpreted according to a rubric that holds them as *mythologically* correct about divine realities, but each incapable of being *literally correct*.¹⁵ In these cases, what are made consistent are the first-order claims and rites of a variety of religions. What is jettisoned is each religion's own self-understanding as being uniquely right about the divine. Again, the strategy is to say that each of the diverse views is right *in its own way* as first-order expression. But, as the reconstruction objection goes, *this reconstruction is not how practitioners of the reconstructed religions understand their own ways*, precisely because they have different second-order interpretations of what those expressions mean. They do not take their theological anthropology *into* but rather *from* their religion. This, argues Keith Ward, vitiates Hick's pluralism, since this pluralism, by making the religions it reconstructs consistent on the model of a single way of realizing some unique end, fails to respect the *plurality* of those religions:

Revisionist pluralism makes its own absolute and exclusive claim—it is just true that there is one reality of supreme value which will bring all creatures to good; and anything which denies this or tries to restrict the ways in which this may happen is false (2000, p. 195)

That is, because the pluralist line of argument is to revise religious beliefs in a fashion that establishes their coherence, their unique differences are leveled for the sake of a single doctrine. This, then, undercuts the pluralist's claim to pluralism.

The exclusivism of pluralism objection is a natural extension of the revision problem. Hick's explanation of how the diversity of religions can be accommodated is

¹⁵ See John Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion* Hick (1989, p. 246) for the Kantian strategy for religious pluralism and p. 348 for the distinction between 'mythological' and 'literal' truth. Hick's pluralism has been criticized for revisionism by Quinn (2006, p. 287), Twiss (1990, p. 543), and Alston (1991, p. 265).

posited on the thought that non-cosmopolitan or exclusivist accounts of how religions relate are, in the end, wrong. But this rejection of exclusivist theology depends upon an exclusivist foundation of its own. As Peter van Inwagen notes,

It is, in any case, very hard to avoid being a religious exclusivist. Professor Hick is himself a religious exclusivist. My religious beliefs are inconsistent with Islam, and so are his.... ‘Religious pluralism’ is not the contradictory of religious exclusivism, but one more case of it (1997, p. 300)

Hick’s own pluralism contradicts and cannot bear the exclusivisms of other religious doctrines, so Hick must still maintain (in a self-contradictory way) that exclusivist religious doctrines are wrong. That is, overtly non-cosmopolitan or non-pluralistic revelatory theologies (and other second-order interpretations of religious observance) cannot truly be literal bearers of the divine since they fail to recognize the legitimacy of pluralistic theology. Or, in short, as Alvin Plantinga observes, “no doubt [Hick] also exclusivistically thinks views incompatible with this one (his) are false.” (1997, p. 297).

Both criticisms of Hick’s meta-exclusivist pluralism are therefore nicely illustrated in the analysis we have provided of Nicholas’ strategy for reconstructing the diversity of rites in the world in terms that accommodate or anticipate uniquely Christian insights into divine nature. Indeed, the very title of Nicholas’s *Cribratio Alchorani*—the *Sifting of the Qur’ān*—suggests this diagnosis. As Nicholas himself puts it,

Now, my intention is as follows: having presupposed the Gospel of Christ, to scrutinize the book of Muhammad and to show that even in it there are contained those [teachings] through which the Gospel would be altogether confirmed, were it in need of confirmation, and that wherever [the Koran] disagrees [with Christ], this [disagreement] has resulted from Muhammad’s ignorance and, following [thereupon], from his perverse intent. (first prologue, § 10, emendations in Hopkins’ translation)

Nicholas Rescher justifiably summarizes Nicholas’ project as: “distinguishing between a Mohammed who has listened to the voice of the God who enters into the hearts of all men and a Mohammed who advances ideas and objectives of his own” (1965, p. 198). Accordingly, for Nicholas of Cusa, Islam started, in its pre-Qur’ānic stages, as a pure religion, but Mohammed’s personal conflicts and political struggles warped it, so that by the time the teachings were recorded, the true religion was occluded. In essence, Islam is a fallen form of Christianity, just as the Christianity of Greece, Europe, and the current Church are fallen. However, in the case of Islam—and, for that matter, all other non-Christian rites—the corrective sources are not internally available; they must come from the Christian evangelism.

What makes this reading meta-exclusivist is not simply that Islam is made into a proto-Christianity, but that Nicholas recognizes only recapitulations of Christian doctrine as legitimate in the Qur’ān, whereas any independently insightful elements of the Qur’ān that do not recapitulate Christian doctrine are either ignored or rejected—and this seems to explain the ambivalence harbored in the terms *tollere* and *tolerare* that we

discussed above.¹⁶ Ideal Christianity is the decoder for reading the Qur'ān, and what falls outside it is not recognized as being right about the divine on its own. Similarly, the earlier and more irenic *De pace fidei* ends with the Word mandating

the wise return and lead the nations to the unity of true worship... [and] come together in Jerusalem as to a common center and accept one faith in the name of all and thereupon establish an everlasting peace so that in peace the Creator of all, blessed forever, will be praised. (19.68)

However, in the cases of the diverse rites addressed in the *De pace fidei*, each is addressed so as to arrive at the peace by making it consistent with Christianity. As such, Nicholas clearly is open to the reconstruction objection.

Moreover, this declaration also suggests why the variety of exclusivism witnessed in Nicholas' theology may be able coherently to support the practical aims usually associated with religious pluralism (notwithstanding our rejection of other aspects of his convictions). To understand why, we must keep in mind that, if, as Nicholas maintains, the one true religion must be an ideal religion (and hence not an actual instantiation of Christianity), then all extant religions, though all true in a way, are all also false to greater or lesser degree. *They are all specifically false in ways that have prevented their capacity either to maintain harmony or to recognize their shared divine object of adoration.* The fact that the practitioners of those religions are perpetually at war with each other is in fact evidence of the falsity of the majority of the constitutive views of the religions in question. The dialogue's conclusion is that there is *una religio in diversitate rituum*, one religion in a variety of rites, which is not a renunciation of the various faiths *as far as they go*, but is a renunciation of any story (though especially of any non-Christian story) of how they fit together in a coherent whole. Nicholas' theology, especially in light of its mystical dimensions (see endnote 9) then, is an expression of the largeness of faith and how it may be manifest in surprising places.

In our view, a version of this meta-exclusivism puzzle will hound pluralisms generally, whether or not they are accompanied by mysticism. For, if any variety of pluralism is to account for how seemingly inconsistent religious views are consistent, it must unify the diversity of rites in a way that (i) explains the diversity of the competing rites and (ii) is consistent with other forms of understanding religion. Both Hick's and Nicholas's theologies can meet the first challenge, but neither's meet the second challenge. From this point of view, it matters little that Nicholas of Cusa is unapologetically Christian and Hick is not.

Let us re-cast the difference between theological exclusivism and religious pluralism in light of the discussion so far. Both sides acknowledge religious diversity on the order of religious rite and creed and both recognize the *prima facie* inconsistency between those diverse views. The issue is whether there is a second-order view on the first-order diversity that (i) establishes that there is consistency (albeit a hidden or

¹⁶ Nicholas terms this interpretive strategy of reading the Qur'ān as recapitulating Christian doctrine *interpretatio pia* (see endnote 7). Accordingly, the Qur'ān not only teaches doctrines partly consistent with Christian notions of Trinity, Incarnation, and Resurrection, but it also has positive coherence with it. Biechler explicitly calls this theological frame "doctrinal reductionism" (2004, p. 289). For a discussion of Nicholas' method of manuduction, see also Bakos (2011).

implicit one) between the diverse religious rites and views, and (ii) that a second-order view establishing the concord amongst the diversity of religions is the criterion for *ultima facie* consistency. And so the issue is not simply whether there is a perspective from which one may view the various religions as amounting to one true religion, but whether this perspective has the standing to override what seem, on the face of it, incontrovertible disagreements about the divine. Pluralists hold that both conditions (i) and (ii) are satisfied, and while exclusivists may concede or deny (i), they will always deny (ii). Consequently, the problem of meta-exclusivism can be re-cast. As noted above, many objections to pluralism have been that it requires that we deny or reconstruct what seem obvious places for disagreement, and hence, that pluralism does damage to the views it is supposed to put into concord. The issue, again, is whether the perspective of the one true religion from which all are coherent is itself exclusive of all the perspectives often internal to the first-order religious commitments, namely, that *they* are the one true religion. *That* commitment, surely, is the original source of religious discord to begin with. As a consequence, not only is any pluralism, in establishing its unifying perspective, actually inconsistent with every form of exclusivist religion, but it is also inconsistent with every other pluralism that unifies the diversity of religions differently. Consider, for example, that Nicholas' and Hick's pluralisms are not consistent.

Relatedly, our critique of the meta-exclusivism of pluralist theology undercuts, we hope, the regular thought that one can be committed to tolerance only if one is a consistent pluralist. Indeed, if our criticism of pluralism is valid, we have evidence that there may not be any forms of theological pluralism that are internally consistent. Alternately, we do have *prima facie* evidence that religious exclusivists can maintain well-motivated forms of religious tolerance in at least some cases.

We must briefly return, then, to Nicholas' understanding of pluralism and the limits of tolerance. A regular question with pluralisms is *how much diversity they can shoulder*. We have shown so far that pluralisms have limits with regard to the variety of meta-accounts of religious diversity they can allow. Pluralisms are not only inconsistent with exclusivist theologies, they are exclusive of other pluralisms. Now, however, the question can be framed as a question of how widely the reconstructions can extend. Can one be a religious pluralist and hold that Satanism, Mickey-Mouse-Worship, and Catholicism each participate in the divine in equally valid ways? If one introduces a criterion that distinguishes as unacceptable one of these "religions," then that value or truth of that criterion will serve as the definitive or essential characteristic of proper religion—many religions may partake in it, but not all. But this is precisely the problem pluralists are supposed to answer—*that of addressing and tolerating those seen as having the wrong religion*. Unless one pushes the notion of *wrong religion* entirely off the map so that there is no logical space for the *true heathen* to occupy, then pluralism will continually recapitulate the problems it was devised to address—a theological solution to living in this world with those who are committed to religions one believes to be wrong. A related problem, moreover, is that if one attempts to tolerate *all possible* religions, then one will be in a position where the statement that all religions are really one religion will be rendered so thin that it will not be sufficient to base a policy of tolerance on it. This is because unlimited pluralism has no definite normative component to it, and so it cannot require tolerance.

To be clear, the ramification of the problem of squaring tolerance with religious pluralism can be captured simply: pluralism does not entail tolerance. As a purely theological view, pluralism is not capable of criticizing religious commitments that define themselves confrontationally against other religions. Crusades may be a central religious rite and jihad a defining practice of such religions. On pluralistic grounds, each may say to his or her neighbor: “we are each local instantiations of the true religion, and thereby we are right in our own ways, but nevertheless, your commitments will not win this time!” For pluralism cannot provide the requisite guidance in adjudicating competing demands between the varieties of religious expression. Under genuine pluralism, if one religion can bring about a convert from one to the other, or eliminate the other for the promotion of their preferred religion, then no better or worse religion is put into place. Hence, even though pluralism may hold that various religions are equally right or that there are no rational ways to prefer one religion over another, it does not itself entail any prescriptive norm regarding how other religions are to be judged.

We grant, of course, that tolerance may be the way some Christians respond to what they take to be theological justifications for religious pluralism. However, to reiterate the point we have just made, while these may be peculiar responses to the theology undergirding pluralism, they are not responses that are entailed by pluralism itself. In fact, it seems quite clear that, if one were to recognize the prescription of tolerance as an expression of core Christian commitments to charity, then the pluralism is undone. The same goes for *any* of the prescriptions for how to face religious diversity—if the prescription (in this case, tolerance) is an expression of the core commitments of one of the competing religions, then the prescription is preferential to one of the religions, and hence to that extent may rightly be understood to be exclusive of other religions. We think that this indeed explains why for Nicholas it is much more difficult to tolerate non-Christian adherents to an Abrahamic faith (e.g., Judaism and Islam) than to tolerate the rites of non-Abrahamic faiths (e.g., Hinduism). In short, we maintain not only that toleration is but one of the many competing responses to religious diversity, but also that to treat toleration as the singular *ultima facie* duty for those facing diversity requires the abandonment of one’s pluralism.

5

To this point, we have discussed how Nicholas of Cusa’s theology illustrates why pluralism cannot shoulder its own burdens to articulate a coherent theology aimed at promoting respect for the diversity of religious expression. However, as we mentioned at the outset, we do not want to be mistaken as therefore laying out an independent justification for religious exclusivism. We must therefore conclude with a caveat to our argument.

Nicholas of Cusa saw the source of the fifteenth century conflict between Europe and the Near East correctly enough. The lament with which he begins the *De pace fidei* makes clear that, in his view, there was a theological chasm between the two sides that funded an intense political conflict in the temporal world. It is only reasonable for us to acknowledge that for a cardinal of the Catholic church in the mid-fifteenth century,

it was also quite reasonable—admirable, even—that that a theological solution would seem to be the most effective means to introduce genuine peace; just as, in his view, a theological divide funded the conflict, so, too, might a theological accord fund peace.

However, even if the historical circumstance might reduce our desire to criticize the Bishop of Brixen, we must acknowledge that intellectual accord is one thing while the reality of atrocities and the intractability of prejudices that make them possible is another. Does it matter if Islam and Christianity are really the same religion practiced through diverse rites when the temporal well-being of the people of Constantinople hangs in the balance? And supposing it is possible to convince Christians and Muslims that they belong to the same religion, who gets Constantinople? And how about Jerusalem? One side may, as a tenet of pluralism, view the other side as Children of God but nevertheless deny that they have any legitimate claim on some parcel of land or pass some law outlawing their favorite rites in some special place. But, even if religious disagreements contribute to political conflicts, the issues are always wider than the religious disagreements that focus and intensify the conflicts.

Accordingly, our final concern is whether the laudable ethico-political objectives of pluralistic theologies are achievable without theology altogether—namely, whether one ought to pursue some variety of tolerance as an entirely secular political agenda. We think that, by illustrating how some limited varieties of theological exclusivism may be better able to support the aims of religious tolerance than pluralistic theologies, we've given reasons to undermine this thought. But we certainly do not intend to harbor the conclusion that toleration and respect are *best* sustained by theological perspectives on religious creeds. Nicholas seemed to think that the solution to conflicts between Christians and Muslims could be achieved by liberalizing their theologies instead of finding independent reasons to liberalize their politics. We, on the other hand, suspect that it is preferable to provide a political justification for religious concord than it is to provide a theological justification for peaceful politics. But whether or not this is possible and whether or not it would even be appropriate to call it a politics of “tolerance” is a project for another time.

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