RELIGIONS AND CONFLICTS

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Many believe that a peaceful, tolerant and respectful coexistence among religions is not compatible with the conviction that only one of them is true. I argue that this 'incompatibility problem' (IP) is grounded in a 'naturalistic assumption' (NA), that is, the assumption that every subject, including religion, should be treated without taking into account that a super-natural being may exist and reveal to us an unexpected way to deal with our experience. I then argue that in matters of religion, NA is untenable and that its very opposite, which I call 'super-naturalistic assumption' (SA), should be adopted. My thesis is that, once SA is adopted, IP can be dismissed and that it is plausible to maintain that a peaceful, tolerant and respectful coexistence among religions is compatible with the conviction that only one of them is true.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the belief that a peaceful, tolerant, and respectful coexistence among religions is incompatible with the conviction that only one of them is true. I call this axiom 'incompatibility problem' (IP).

IP is widely held in Contemporary Western society. It traces back to the Enlightenment and it was probably the result of a reaction to the evil that sometimes characterized religious people and institutions. In his first *Letter concerning Toleration* (1689), Locke focused on the conflicts and wars that plagued Europe in his time, which were often the result of religious intolerance. Locke noted how this was obviously in contradiction with the basic message of peace conveyed by the Gospel. He identified tolerance with 'the chief characteristic mark of the true Church'[1] and Christianity with 'the most modest and peaceable religion that ever was.'[2] Some decades later, Hume concentrated upon the relationship between religions and peace. Unlike Locke, he criticised the conviction that only one religion is true. In his *Natural History of Religion* (1755), he argued that from that conviction (that only one religion is true) inevitably followed conflicts and violence:

> While one sole object of devotion is acknowledged, the worship of other deities is regarded as absurd and impious. Nay, this unity of object seems naturally to require the unity of faith and ceremonies, and furnishes designing

> men with a pretence for representing their adversaries as profane, and the objects of divine as well as human vengeance.[3]

Hume's conviction has come down to the present times.[4] Thinkers such as P. Quinn claim that, if believers don't support the superiority of their religion over other religious perspectives, then they will be more tolerant toward those perspectives.[5] Similarly, R. McKim notes that, confronting religious diversity, one should be open to accepting the hypothesis 'that the position one had thought to be correct may be wrong', and that 'one of the other positions may be right'.[6] In other words, giving up the conviction that only one religion is true would solve IP. It would promote a more inclusive society, based on diversity of opinion.

In this essay, I argue that IP is the result of what I call a 'naturalistic assumption' (NA). Starting from this assumption, religious beliefs and faiths are explored intellectually as if they did not involve any reference to a super-natural being and his revelation. This is confirmed by the fact that the methodology employed by those who hold IP apply indifferently to religious experience and other experience as well.[7] My thesis is that, when it comes to religious matters, NA should be abandoned and replaced by a 'super-naturalistic assumption' (SA). Assuming the existence of a super-natural being who reveals himself to us and takes part in our religious experience may help us reconcile the two poles of IP. In other words, SA may promote respect and peace among religions and, at the same time, a firm belief that only one of them is true.

1 IP IMPLIES NA

In this section, I intend to argue that IP implies NA. If IP applies to the religious realm as well as to traditions, cultures, and philosophies, then IP implies NA or, put otherwise, it does not take into consideration SA.

This can be demonstrated by taking into consideration the three reasons which J. Hick—one of the most famous proponents of IP[8]—brings forth in support of his famous theory of religious pluralism.[9] The first reason is grounded in the idea that all of the world's religions are 'transformational,' namely, they provide their followers with 'transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.'[10] This transformation makes them morally better, because they are no longer interested in their individual salvation (as if religion dealt with acquiring a 'ticket' to eternal life), but aim to liberate themselves from their desires and to reorient their existence around the divine. The normative core of religion is to be transformational, and all major religions can equally be considered salvific. (I have just shifted my attention from religious truth to salvation and ultimate destiny. However, as Hick himself has persuasively stated, 'the truth-claim and the salvation-claim cohere closely together and should be treated as a single package.'[11]) The second reason for supporting religious pluralism is that 'in the great majority of cases—say 98 to 99 percent—the religion in which a person believes and to which he adheres depends upon where he

was born.'[12] Evidently, the fact that one was born in a particular part of the world cannot be considered a plausible reason for identifying one's religion with the only true religion. Third, Hick argues that in the present century we have become aware that there are substantially different patterns and not only one to interpret human experience. [13] In this new light, the attitude of those who believe that their own gospel is true 'and that other gospels are false in so far as they differ from it'[14] becomes simply untenable.

Hick supports his view of religious pluralism with arguments that could be applied to any realm of human experience, from which follows that he adopts NA. This is especially evident in the case of the second reason. The fact that one's beliefs may depend upon where one was born is not indicative of the truth of such beliefs—whether or not they are religious. The same can be said of the third reason. Once we become convinced that various interpretations can be offered to understand our experience, we should adopt a pluralistic approach to all of our beliefs, and not only the religious ones. Things may seem different in the case of the first reason given by Hick, i.e., all of the world's religions are transformational. This reason, in fact, relates to the existence of a super-natural being and the afterlife, which is why it may seem to be extraneous to NA. (This reference to a super-natural reality may appear not entirely plausible, as has been pointed out: 'Even if we accept that our ultimate goal is or should be the overcoming of self-centeredness, why should anyone suppose that we need religion in order to achieve that goal?'.[15] My interest, however, is not in the internal coherence of Hick's argument; I am rather interested in establishing whether or not he adopts NA, however correct the argument he proposes may be.) On closer inspection, however, it is clear that the line of reasoning proposed by Hick in support of 'transformational parity' among religions may apply to every human experience. If genuine religion is salvific and transformational, and if there are many transformational experiences, none of them can presume to be the only genuine religion. It is obvious, therefore, that this argument in support of 'transformational parity' among religions does not depend on the reference to a super-natural being and the influence he may exert on human experience.

2 TWO ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE EMPLOYMENT OF NA IN RELIGIOUS MATTERS

In this section, I intend to propose two arguments for the claim that NA, which IP presupposes, is not applicable to religious matters.

The first argument is implicit in what I have argued in the previous section—therefore, presenting this argument will take little time. I showed that IP applies indifferently to religious and non-religious subjects. This means that IP overlooks that which is specific to religion. As a result, IP may successfully apply to various experiences except the religious one. Not taking into consideration any possible aspect of a particular experience, in fact, is not the best possible viewpoint from which to achieve an understanding of it. The hypothesis that a super-natural being exists and participates in the religious experience of believers might later prove to be

untrue. However, the decision to exclude from the outset this hypothesis seems to limit one's understanding of how believers experience their faith and everything related to it, including how they view other religions.

In addition to this rebutting argument, let me now propose an undercutting one. Let me start by noting that NA traces back to Locke's view of faith and reason, according to which assent to propositions comes in degrees and we should proportion our degree of assent to the available evidence. For Locke, we should not entertain 'any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built upon will warrant.'[16] These proofs are public and that which they prove to be true is accepted by everybody. The same cannot be said of that which is believed by those whom Locke calls 'enthusiasts.' They don't offer any proof on the basis of which what they believe can be believed by everybody else:

> if they believe it to be true, *because it is a revelation*, and have *no other reason* for its being a revelation, but because they are *fully persuaded without any other reason* that it is true, they believe it to be a revelation *only because they strongly believe* it to be a revelation, which is a very unsafe ground to proceed on.[17]

Locke's view of faith and reason became the 'dominant model' in which philosophers and non-philosophers were trained in the course of the modern age.[18] This model increasingly came to imply that a complex of experiences and relevant beliefs, which only faithful may have,[19] cannot be taken into account, which is precisely what I mean by NA. Like any other subject, religion can be investigated only by way of rational arguments that *everyone* believes.[20] To put it formally,

(1) Only statements that everyone believes (or follow from what everyone believes) can be employed to attain the truth about human experience, including religion and matters related to it.

However, (1) is not believed by everyone. Religious believers may believe—no matter whether rightly or not—that reason alone is insufficient to achieve an understanding of that which pertains to God and religion. They may believe that a divine revelation, which does not coincide with that which everyone believes, is necessary for them to achieve an understanding of religion and, along with it, of matters such as the existence of only one God, the existence of only one true religion, and how to treat the followers of other religions. Again to put the point formally:

(2) Not everyone believes (1)
(3) From (2) follows that (1) is to be rejected.
(4) Given that (1) is equivalent to NA, NA is to be rejected, and SA is to be adopted.

The fact that, once NA has been rejected, SA should replace it, can be explained as follows. Rejecting the conviction that every subject, including the religious one, can be treated without taking into consideration the existence of a super-natural being and his revelation is clearly equivalent to saying that a super-naturalistic assumption must be adopted. (Someone may object that God's existence and the content of his revelation cannot be treated in the same way. This is especially true for Locke, who was convinced that God's existence, unlike the divine revelation, was knowable by way of demonstration.[21] Nevertheless, the belief that God exists has become more and more debatable in the course of the last centuries.[22] Thus it is no longer seen as a statement that, at least in principle, everyone can know.[23])

In the next section I will argue that, once SA is adopted, IP may be dismissed as not constituting a problem. Before proceeding, however, two considerations need to be taken into account.

First, alternative attempts may be made to oppose IP without adopting SA. They, however, don't seem to dismiss IP as untrue, which is why the necessity of assuming SA is confirmed.

Among those attempts is Plantinga's exemplary argument aimed at rejecting a philosophical view that includes IP. According to this view, there is something wrong in claiming that, among the existing religions, one is true and the others are not. (As I said, this accusation, which I call SW (*something wrong*), includes IP: SW ⊃ IP. In fact, IP emphasizes that the claim that there is only one true religion is unacceptable because is incompatible with peace among religions, while SW more generally points out that there is something wrong with the claim in question.) Plantinga argues that, on the contrary, it is SW that is wrong. As he says, if one believes that one possesses knowledge that others do not, one cannot be blamed for being convinced that one's own view is better than others' views. As a result, one would not have any reason for modifying one's conviction. Of course, this is the condition in which those who affirm the exclusive truth of their religion find themselves. What is more interesting, however, is that the detractors of religious exclusiveness find themselves in this condition as well. More precisely, everyone seems to reason in this way. Anyone who believes that they find themselves, even without any merit of their own, in a condition which is epistemically superior to that of others, would end up considering their position better than others' positions and would consequently refuse to exchange it for any other. This regards also those, like Hick, who spoke of the need to put aside Christian exclusivism: 'In the light of our accumulated knowledge of the other great world faiths, [Christian exclusivism] has become unacceptable to all except a minority of dogmatic diehards.'[24] Plantinga's conclusion is therefore hard to reject: 'The abstemious pluralist who brings charges of intellectual arrogance against the believer is in a familiar but perilous dialectical situation; he shoots himself in the foot, is hoist with his own petard, holds a position that in a certain way is self-referentially inconsistent in the circumstances.'[25]

Plantinga's argument shows that those who hold IP, and claim that it can be solved if religious exclusivism is given up, are exclusivists too. They are not ready to abandon their view either. (Plantinga's position is to be numbered among the ones

that, in the current debate on disagreement, can be defined 'non-conformist' or 'steadfast'[26] and support the conviction that perseverance in the face of controversy is epistemologically plausible. In this, Plantinga is joined by P. Van Inwagen, for whom, if one has incommunicable evidence that other parties lack, then one is within one's right to maintain one's own belief.[27])

Let me now point out that the argument offered by Plantinga does not provide any reason to solve IP. It limits itself to show that, if SW is true, then the same may be said of any possible view, including SW's negation. From this follows that Plantinga's argument may even end up reinforcing intolerance and conflicts. If there is nothing wrong with the person who believes that s/he possesses knowledge that others do not, and accordingly prefers his/her view—and his/her religion—to others, then the person in question may reasonably consider himself/herself superior to others, and somewhat morally obliged to force them to accept his/her views.

Another attempt to dismiss IP as not representing a problem without having recourse to SA can be seen in P. Byrne's reflection on tolerance and religious pluralism.[28] Byrne convincingly argues that tolerance as a virtue implies that one holds strong convictions and it also justifies that which one tolerates, opening up the possibility for a re-examination of one's own convictions. In other words, practising the virtue of tolerance, which Byrne also calls 'full tolerance', seemingly reconciles the two poles of IP. As far as I can see, however, the fully tolerant 'sees value in the differing and opposing convictions of others' *only if* the coexistence of such convictions with his/her own beliefs is part of his/her own beliefs. In other words, only at first sight is the fully tolerant welcoming the convictions *of others*; on closer inspection, s/he is putting into practice (and confirming) his or her own beliefs. As a consequence, the *difference*, i.e., one of the conditions that Byrne insightfully considers necessarily related to tolerance,[29] is set aside. Also, Byrne says that the fully tolerant 'will be prepared to go further and examine whether the different life styles and opinions they confront provide grounds for re-examining the worth of their own life-styles and opinions.'[30] It is plausible to think, however, that the tolerant person in question will not be ready to revise *every* belief and opinion. A Christian believer may be ready to revise many of the views s/he usually holds. Nevertheless, the fact that there is only one God, that Jesus is the son of God, that he came into the world for our salvation, etc. are beliefs that even a fully tolerant Christian is not expected to revise.

The second consideration to take into account is that rejecting (1) and adopting SA does not coincide with

(5) Commonly accepted rational criteria, including the principle of non-contradiction, must be abandoned when it comes to religion.

In other words, my proposal should not be associated with the one advanced in the course of last decades by influential scholars such as J. Hick, W. Cantwell Smith, and P. Knitter. As is known, they have argued that the principle of non-contradiction should not apply to religious beliefs. According to Hick, it is the Aristotelian concept

of truth, which is intrinsically related to the principle of non-contradiction, that must be abandoned: it is 'a matter of either-or. It is either this or not this: it cannot be both.'[31] For Cantwell Smith, 'in all ultimate matters, truth lies not in an either-or but in a both-and.'[32] Finally, Knitter denies the employment of the principle of non-contradiction since 'all religious experience and all religious language must be two-eyed, dipolar, a union of opposites.'[33]

Obviously, the employment of the principle of non-contradiction in any matter, including the religious ones, may seem to be due to NA. Consequently, its rejection may look similar to the rejection of NA and the adoption of SA. To put it otherwise, (4) and (5) would be equivalent to each other, and would both contradict (1).

The similarity in question, however, holds only superficially. It is true that (1) and (5) are two opposite extremes. According to (1), religious statements can only be explored by way of commonly accepted beliefs, including the principle of non-contradiction. According to (5), on the contrary, principles such as the one at stake should be abandoned, which is the view maintained by the scholars mentioned above. However, (4) does not equal (5), and should rather be situated between (1) and (5). In fact, (4) differs from (1) and resembles (5) on the ground that some religious beliefs, which are due to a divine revelation, may allow us to understand aspects of religion otherwise inconceivable. On the other hand, (4) resembles (1) and differs from (5) on the ground that a contradiction between common experience and religious experience should not arise. Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of faith, to which I will appeal in the next section while proposing to adopt SA, includes the conviction that, if God is the author of both faith and reason, no contradiction is acceptable between them: 'since both kinds of truth are from God. God would be the author of error, a thing which is impossible.'[34]

3 IP CAN BE DISMISSED IF SA REPLACES NA

It is now time to explore the hypothesis that the introduction of SA may dismiss IP as not representing a problem. If a super-natural person exists and grants believers a special relationship with him, they may believe that their religion is the only true one and, at the same time, that they should not consider themselves superior to others.

Among the various religious traditions, I will consider Christianity, especially Thomas Aquinas's reflection on faith and its propagation. (Of course, the way I will use this reflection goes beyond Aquinas's intentions and real claims. I will use thoughts of him that can apply to religious pluralism, although Aquinas did not do this. See below, footnotes 51ff.)

The decision to delimit my choice is not only due to space constraints; it is also encouraged by the fact that Aquinas's reflection on faith can appropriately be seen as 'the dominant Western tradition of thought on the subject,' susceptible of being 'accepted today by many both Catholic and Protestant Christians, as well as by the agnostic and atheist critics of Christianity.'[35] Furthermore, nothing prevents us from considering some of Aquinas's thoughts as applicable to other religious traditions. God's omnipotence and love, for example, is shared by at least the major world's

religions. Consequently, at least some of the responses to IP that emerge from Aquinas's thought can apply to other religions as well.

Some may still object to the adoption of SA from the viewpoint offered by only one religion. In other words, some may claim that, even if the choice I have just made is temporarily acceptable, our final aim should be to adopt SA from the viewpoint of all of the existing religions.

In reply, let me note that this objection follows either from (1) or from religious traditions. In the former case, the objection should be rejected with (1), since I have shown so far that (1) is to be rejected. In the latter case, the objection at hand can only emerge from *some* of those traditions, because at least the outstanding branches of Christianity, Judaism and Islam would not accept the idea that truth in religion can only be achieved from a viewpoint that is common to them. As a consequence, the objection ends up confirming my choice and the related thesis that it is from *some* religious traditions and not from all of them that we may adopt SA.

Let me now start my investigation of how such adoption may dismiss IP. I begin by taking into account Aquinas's reflection on how religious faith should be held, cultivated and propagated.

According to Thomas, faith is 'an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine Truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God.'[36] It is by way of will moved by divine grace that believers take as true various statements that, for them, are divinely revealed. God is, therefore, 'the chief and proper cause of faith.'[37] By faith, believers become aware of things that 'surpass human reason. Hence, they [the things in question] do not come to man's knowledge unless God reveals them.'[38]

It may seem, at least at first sight, that for Aquinas believers are passively involved in the act of faith. An objection raised against Aquinas's view of faith is precisely that, according to Augustine, 'faith depends on the believer's will.' Aquinas responds that

> To believe does indeed depend on the will of the believer; but man's will needs to be prepared by God with grace, in order that he may be raised to things which are above his nature.[39]

Only the intervention of God can justify the certainty that for Aquinas characterizes the Christian faith in things that are above nature. Aquinas holds that the certainty at issue—at least in its paradigmatic instantiations—is even superior to that of demonstrative knowledge.[40]

From these considerations emerges that, if the certainty of faith is caused by the omnipotent and omniscient God, who neither errs nor deceives, the believers who find themselves with such certainty will not have any reason to abandon their faith. As Plantinga and van Inwagen argue (see above, footnotes 25 ff.), the faithful may consider themselves gifted with knowledge, which others did not receive, and may consequently find that they are right not to want to give it up in the face of controversy and religious pluralism.

Once individuated good reasons for sticking to one's faith and keeping to believe that only one's religion is true, no matter how many other religious traditions exist, what can be said about the need of peaceful coexistence with them? Will this coexistence be at risk, once affirmed the truth of one's faith and the (even relative and partial) falseness of the others?

Aquinas's reflection offers a reasonable response. Although faith is an intellectual act, its perfection can be achieved only by way of charity, i.e., love for God which God himself grants to believers. This is explained by the conviction that 'the act of faith is directed to the object of the will, i.e. the good, as to its end: and this good … is the end of faith, viz. the Divine good.' The divine good 'is the proper object of charity. Therefore charity is called the form of faith in so far as the act of faith is perfected and formed by charity.'[41]

Thus, the commandment of love is the very center of the Christian belief.[42] Based on it, believers must make a commitment to increase their love for God and their neighbour.[43] Given the fact that this love perfects faith, we may also say that increasing such a love is matched by a parallel increase of faith, which is precisely that which Christians are expected to desire: 'The apostles said to the Lord, "increase our faith."'[44] This presupposes that believers experience both faith and love for God at different levels of intensity. Saint Paul openly says that 'the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith;'[45] in the same vein, Aquinas wonders—and responds positively—'whether faith can be greater in one man than in another.'[46]

For Aquinas, it is by way of this inextricable connection between faith and charity that God grants faith to believers. Given this connection, claiming the truth of one's religion does not exclude, actually implies a peaceful attitude toward other religions. Believers who are guided by love for God and the neighbour should be the best possible candidates to promote the attitude in question.

At least four decisive considerations follow, which can decisively help us move away from IP.

First, if assent to divine revelation is granted by God and is not due to personal efforts, those who have been graciously received it should not feel superior over those who were not equally gifted. While focusing on the pre-Christian era, Aquinas argues that salvation might also have been possible for people who had not received any divine revelation. Some Gentiles—so he says—might have accessed eternal salvation because 'though they did not believe in Him explicitly, they did, nevertheless, have implicit faith through believing in Divine providence, since they believed that God would deliver mankind in whatever way was pleasing to Him.'[47] In other words, they believed the divine revelation 'implicitly,'[48] which means that they were 'prepared to believe whatever is contained in the Divine Scriptures.'[49] In this connection, a famous verse of the Gospel reads: 'Tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you.'[50] This warning, which is addressed by Jesus to his disciples, points out that those who have been granted familiarity with him, who the Gospel says is the truth, should not consider themselves better than others.

Second, if it is charity that perfects faith, then those who firmly believe that their religion is true, do so because they love God as well as their neighbour. They are committed to making progress in their spiritual perfection, which includes proportionate high levels of moral attitude, given the fact that charity consists in love for God and the neighbour as well. They should, therefore, be committed to the dismissal of IP by promoting a peaceful relationship with other people, including adherents to different religious traditions. Obviously, such a commitment will be seriously taken only by those who equally seriously intend to perfect themselves spiritually and morally. It follows that, even if some dismiss IP, IP remains true for all the remaining believers, or more precisely, remains true in proportion to the lack of believers' spiritual and moral progress.

Third, Aquinas may be numbered among those believers who lack the progress in question. What he thinks of all of the other religious faiths seemingly aligns with IP, because neither a peaceful nor a respectful attitude toward adherents of other religions emerge from his conviction that his religion is the only true one. For him, heretics, Saracens, Moors, Jews and Pagans commit a grave sin such as the sin of unbelief, which 'is greater than any sin that occurs in the perversion of morals.'[51] It is true that Aquinas suggests that those who engage in false worship can be tolerated.[52] He also says, however, that heretics deserve 'to be severed from the world by death.'[53] They 'corrupt the faith which weakens the soul,' which—so Aquinas's argument goes on—is 'a much graver matter…than to forge money;' consequently, 'if forgers of money and other evil-doers are forthwith condemned to death by the secular authority, much more reason is there for heretics.'[54]

On closer inspection, however, this seeming lack of peaceful disposition toward those who believe in 'false gods' is not relatable to IP. IP regards the relationship between peace and *religious doctrines*, while Aquinas's view regards the ability of religions to meet *social and political needs*. In Aquinas's time, lack of distinction between politics and religion was customary; as a result, every religious doctrine and/or practice other than Christianity was automatically seen as politically and socially dangerous. This called for any remedy that appeared to be appropriate, however unacceptable it may seem from Contemporary Western society's viewpoint. This is why, if we move from Aquinas's political and social perspective and go back to the merely religious doctrinal concern, which is typical of IP, it is possible to confirm the thesis that Aquinas's account of faith and charity helps to reject IP. IP implies that those who firmly believe that their religion is the only true one should force the adherents to other religions to convert. This, however, is at odds with Aquinas's conviction that no one should force others to deviate from their conscience, even if there are good reasons for believing that the conscience in question is erroneous. Aquinas very clearly claims that 'every will at variance with reason, whether right or erring, is always evil;' [55] consequently,

> in like manner, to believe in Christ is good in itself, and necessary for salvation: but the will does not tend thereto, except inasmuch as it is proposed by the reason. Consequently, if it be proposed by the reason as

> something evil, the will tends to it as to something evil; not as if it were evil in itself, but because it is evil accidentally, through the apprehension of the reason.[56]

Fourth, if those who are considered to be guided by erroneous conscience in their religious faith cannot be forced to convert, then the only action that should be taken toward them is the 'fraternal correction,' which is an act of charity because 'is directed to the amendment of the sinner.'[57] This correction implies the employment of reason, which Aquinas trusts. If faith is perfected by charity, then those who firmly believe that their religion is true, are expected to love God and any of his creatures, including human reason. For Aquinas, reason is fully reliable and consistent with the Christian faith. He claims that 'the contrary of a truth cannot be demonstrated,' and 'arguments brought against faith cannot be demonstrations.'[58] Of course, Aquinas is aware that 'abuse' and 'insufficiency of reason' can occur, but 'it is possible from the principles of philosophy to refute an error of this kind, either by showing it to be altogether impossible, or not to be necessary.'[59] This implies that reason is expected to be valued and used to the best of human abilities. Given this high level of trust, no limits should be imposed on its employment. Not surprisingly, Aquinas relies on the employment of reason when it comes to dialogue among traditions, cultures and religions that do not have anything else in common.[60] After all, he believes that 'no doctrine is so false as not to have some truth mingled with error.'[61] If so, it is by way of a patient, optimistic and open-minded employment of our cognitive faculties that the truth mingled with error can be found. In this connection, Aquinas seems to be in the best possible condition to employ reason in such an open-minded way, given his conviction that no demonstrations can be found against that which he cares most about, i.e., his faith.

What I have said so far shows that IP may be solved when it comes to religious beliefs that are grounded in the conviction that charity and firmness of faith are inextricably connected with one another. The conviction that faith and charity can be experienced at different levels of intensity and that believers are expected to want to increase them shows that IP remains true in proportion to the lack of this wish as well as the lack of commitment to becoming more and more faithful and charitable. In other words, one dismisses IP in proportion to one's attempt to perfect oneself spiritually and morally.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have addressed IP, which is widely accepted in Contemporary Western society and constitutes a problem that many propose to solve by replacing religious exclusivism with various forms of religious pluralism. If one is ready to doubt the truth of one's religious belief and accept the idea that other faiths and beliefs may be true—so it is often argued—one paves the way for mutual respect and more tolerance among religions.

I have argued first that IP, as well as the pluralist solution to it, implies NA, which consists in overlooking SA, i.e., the assumption that a super-natural being exists and plays a role in our religious experience. I have then shown that, when it comes to religion, there are at least two convincing arguments that lead to rejecting NA and adopting SA. Finally, I have argued that adopting SA may successfully dismiss IP. If a super-natural person, omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly loving exists and takes part in our experience, then it is plausible to reconcile the two poles of IP, i.e., religious exclusivism and, on the other hand, a peaceful coexistence among religious beliefs. Once involved in a love-relationship with a super-natural person, in fact, a believer may plausibly be led, on the one hand, to firmly hold the truth of his or her religious experience and, on the other hand, to love other people and to respect their conscience, however erroneous it may be. Especially relevant to this perspective is the fact that, if the relationship with a super-natural being is a personal one, its outcomes depend on the intensity with which believers experience it. In other words, from the fact that a religious view potentially offers a dismissal of IP by no means follows that all of the adherents to that view are able to dismiss IP. This dismissal is instead possible in proportion to the attempt that believers make to perfect themselves spiritually and morally.

Notes

[1] John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, trans. by W. Popple, 1689 (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), p. 1.

[2] Ibid., p. 11.

[3] David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. by H. Root (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956), p. ix.

[4] See, for example, Jan Assmann's *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. by R. Savage (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2010). According to this famous Egyptologist, religious violence, including the one among the practitioners of various monotheisms, is grounded in the Mosaic exclusive monotheism. Assmann contrasts monotheism with ancient polytheism, which he finds intrinsically ready to accept otherness.

[5] See Philip Quinn, 'Religious Diversity and Religious Toleration,' *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 50 (2001), pp. 57–80; 'Epistemology in Philosophy of Religion,' in Paul Moser (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook on Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002), pp. 533–37.

[6] Robert McKim *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford Press. 2001), pp. 154f.

[7] Like IP, NA is widely held in Contemporary Western society. While introducing a book devoted to naturalism's success, Georg Gasser says that naturalism has shaped 'the philosophical landscape like no other philosophical tradition in the second half of the last century' (Georg Gasser (ed.), *How Successful is Naturalism?* [Frankfurt, Paris, Ebikon, Lancaster, New Brunswick: Ontos Verlag 2009], p. 3).

[8] As Nicholas Wolterstorff notes, 'Hick assumes that any "post axial" religion that does not accord equal religious significance to all post-axial religions perforce harbours within itself the threat of coercion and violence, thereby being a menace to peace' (Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Why

Can't We All Just Get Along with Each Other?' in Nigel Biggar and Linda Hogan (eds), *Religious voices in public places* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], p. 23).

[9] For this clear individuation of the three reasons in question, I am indebted to David Basinger, 'Religious Diversity (Pluralism)', in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/religious-pluralism/>.

[10] John Hick, 'The Philosophy of World Religions,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 37 (1984), p. 229.

[11] John Hick, *Problems of religious pluralism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 1985), p. 46.

[12] John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London: Macmillan Press 1980), p. 44.

[13] See John Hick, 'The Philosophy of World Religions,' p. 232.

[14] John Hick, *Problems of religious pluralism*, p. 28.

[15] Graham Oppy, *Reinventing Philosophy of Religion: An Opinionated Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2014), p. 12.

[16] John Locke, *An Essay concerning Humane Understanding* [London: Printed for Awhsham and John Churchil, at the Black-Swan in Pater-Noster-Row, and Samuel Manship, at the Ship in Cornhill, near the Royal Exchange, 1700], IV, xix,1.

[17] Ibid., IV, xix, 10-11, emphasis added.

[18] See John Jenkins, 'Faith and revelation,' in B. Davies (ed.), *Philosophy of religion. A guide to the subject* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007), p. 213.

[19] See below, footnote 38.

[20] 'What in principle everybody knows,' is the expression that has been used by Ralph McInerny to stress the autonomy of philosophical reflection from the influence of religious belief. To put it in McInerny's own words, 'philosophy is a discourse that pins itself to truths that are in the public domain, so that an argument must always be hooked up to the things that in principle everybody knows.' (Ralph McInerny, 'How I became a Christian philosopher', *Faith and Philosophy* 15 [1998], pp. 145f.). Alvin Plantinga's words perhaps make the meaning of 'what in principle everybody knows' clearer: 'What we all or nearly all know or take for granted or firmly believe, or what at any rate those conducting the inquiry know or take for granted or believe' (Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], p. 272).

[21] For him, the belief that God exists is backed by such satisfactory evidence that we can claim that we have *knowledge* that God exists (see John Locke, *An Essay concerning Humane Understanding*, IV, x, 6).

[22] A prominent Catholic historian of philosophy such as Etienne Gilson (1884-1978), while asking himself if philosophy alone, without the help of revelation, is able to affirm the truth of God's existence beyond doubt, referred to his philosophical contemporaries as follows: 'Some of them say there is no God; others say that there is a God but that His existence cannot be demonstrated; still others say there is a God and they can prove His existence, but their demonstrations fail to carry conviction, or else what they call God in no way resembles the object of our religious worship' (Etienne Gilson, 'What is Christian philosophy?' in Anton Pegis (ed.), *A Gilson reader. Selected writings of Etienne Gilson* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and C., 1957), pp. 180f.).

[23] Aquinas is seen as the thinker who investigated this subject independently of the propositional content of faith. Trust in God and love for him, however, seem to have played a substantial role in such investigations. For more on this, see Roberto Di Ceglie, 'Preambles of Faith and Modern Accounts of Aquinas's Thought,' *International Philosophical Quarterly* 58 (2018), pp. 437-51.

[24] John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), p. 27, cited in Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 438.

[25] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 446.

[26] See David Christensen and Jennifer Lackey (eds), *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 2.

[27] See Peter Van Inwagen, 'It is Wrong, Always, Everywhere, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything, Upon Insufficient Evidence,' in Jeffrey Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder (eds.), *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality* (Hanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), pp. 137–154.

[28] Peter Byrne, 'Religious Tolerance, Diversity, and Pluralism,' in Anthony O'Hear (ed.), *Philosophy and Religion*. Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement: 68 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), pp. 287-309.

[29] 'Difference: agents who tolerate other people's behavior, words, or thoughts note that others' behaviour etc. is different from their own ' (Ibid., p. 288)

[30] Ibid., p. 294. See also p. 300, where Byrne mentions the re-examination of 'religious beliefs' and not mere 'opinions.'

[31] John Hick, 'The Outcome of Truth: Dialogue into Truth,' in John Hick (ed.), *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth-Claims* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), pp. 152f.

[32] William Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (Ney York: New American Library 1963), p. 17.

[33] Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1985), p. 221. The idea that a 'two-eyed' approach to religion should replace a 'one-eyed' one, i.e., an approach that conveys the conviction that there is only one exclusivist truth about religious matters, traces back to the New Testament scholar and theologian John Robinson's book titled *Truth is Two-Eyed* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1979).

[34] 'Cum utrumque sit nobis a Deo, Deus nobis esset auctor falsitatis, quod est impossibile' (Aquinas, *Super Boethium De Trinitate*, 2, 3, trans. by R. Brennan [New York: Herder and Herder, 1946]. Hereafter, Latin texts are from www.corpusthomisticum.org). This matches a widespread philosophical conviction, according to which rejecting the principle of non-contradiction is self-referentially contradictory. As is known, in the fourth book of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argues that rejecting this principle implies that the principle in question is wrong and its opposite is right, which obviously re-affirms the validity of the principle (see Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4, 4, 1006a35ff.) In regard to religious pluralism and the question of truth, it has been said that 'one who abandons the principle of non-contradiction is reduced to utter silence, for he or she has rejected a necessary condition for the coherent and meaningful statement of any position whatsoever' (Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* [Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 1991], p. 145).

[35] John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge. A Modern Introduction to the Problem of Religious Knowledge* (1957) (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock 2009), p. 12. More recently, Gregory Dawes claimed that 'few Christians will have read Aquinas, but since his view is widely shared by theologians they may have absorbed it "by osmosis."' (Gregory Dawes, 'The Act of Faith: Aquinas and the Moderns,' in Jonathan Kvanvig (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 6 [New York: Oxford University Press 2015], p. 80)

[36] 'Actus intellectus assentientis veritati divinae ex imperio voluntatis a Deo motae per gratiam' (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, second and revised edition [London: Oates and Washbourne, 1920], hereafter: ST, II-II, q. 2, a. 9).

[37] Aquinas states that 'science begets and nourishes faith, by way of external persuasion afforded by science; but the chief and proper cause of faith (*principalis et propria causa fidei*) is that which moves man inwardly to assent' (ST, q. 6, a. 1, ad 1).

[38] 'Ea enim quae sunt fidei excedunt rationem humanam: unde non cadunt in contemplatione hominis nisi Deo revelante.' (ST, q. 6, a. 1).

[39] 'Credere quidem in voluntate credentium consistit: sed oportet quod voluntas hominis praeparetur a Deo per gratiam ad hoc quod elevetur in ea quae sunt supra naturam' (ST, q. 6, a. 1, ad 3). Of course, one may object that this intervention of God is incompatible with the employment of free-will. On closer inspection, however, it is possible to reply that for Aquinas, as Frederick Bauerschmidt points out, 'God can move the will without compromising human freedom' (Frederick Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: faith, reason, and following Christ* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], p. 147). Bauerschmidt also refers to Aquinas's treatment of grace as both 'operating,' attributable to God, and 'cooperating,' attributable to the human being. This treatment is contained in ST I-II, q. 111, a. 2,ad 2, where Thomas says that 'God does not justify us without ourselves, because whilst we are being justified we consent to God's justification by a movement of our free will. Nevertheless, this movement is not the cause of grace, but the effect.'

[40] See ST, II-II, q. 4, a. 8, where Aquinas compares the certainty of faith with that of the three intellectual virtues that share with faith the necessity of their object: science, wisdom, and understanding. For more on this, see Roberto Di Ceglie, 'Faith, reason, and charity in Thomas Aquians's thought,' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69 (2016), pp. 133-146.

[41] 'Actus fidei ordinatur ad objectum voluntatis, quod est bonum, sicut ad finem. Hoc autem bonum quod est finis fidei, scilicet bonum divinum, est proprium objectum caritatis. Et ideo caritas dicitur forma fidei, inquantum per caritatem actus fidei perficitur et formatur' (ST, II-II, q. 4, a. 3).

[42] Peter J. Riga summarizes this perspective as follows: 'For St. Thomas faith is the assent to the true on the authority of the one who reveals this truth, and thus faith is formally an act of the intelligence. Yet, Thomas does recognize the large part which the will plays in the act of faith. Love renders the act of faith meritorious and, as it were, informs and gives life to faith and the adherence itself is a work of love so that the act of faith is an act intrinsically determined by affective elements' (Peter Riga, 'The act of faith in Augustine and Aquinas,' *The Thomist* 35 (1971), p. 168). William Mann insists on the fact that faith is not simply cognitive or propositional in nature, and emphasizes a similarity between Aquinas and Luther: 'For both accounts [Aquinas' and Luther's], then, genuine faith entails love of God and neighbour' (William Mann, entry 'Theological virtues', in Edward Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [London and New York: Routledge 1998], vol. 9, p. 329).

[43] 'And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more' (Phil 1:99), tr. hereafter NRSV. While commenting on Aquinas's view of faith, Mark Wynn says that 'the assent of faith is both "cognitive" (insofar as it involves beliefs) and action-orienting (since it serves a practical goal, and requires an associated mode of life here and now).' (Mark Wynn, 'Religious Faith', in Graham Oppy [ed.], *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, [London: Routledge 2015], p. 2).

[44] Lk 17:5.

[45] Rm, 1: 17.

[46] See ST, II-II, q. 5, a. 4: 'The quantity of a habit may be considered from two points of view: first, on the part of the object; secondly, on the part of its participation by the subject. Now the object of faith may be considered in two ways: first, in respect of its formal aspect; secondly, in respect of the material object which is proposed to be believed. Now the formal object of faith is one and simple, namely the First Truth, as stated above. Hence in this respect there is no diversity of faith among believers, but it is specifically one in all, as stated above. But the things which are proposed as the matter of our belief are many and can be received more or less explicitly; and in this respect one man can believe explicitly more things than another, so that faith can be greater in one on account of its being more explicit. If, on the other hand, we consider faith from the point of view of its participation by the subject, this happens in two ways, since the act of faith proceeds both from the intellect from the will, as stated above. Consequently a man's faith may be described as being greater, in one way, on the part of his intellect, on account of its greater certitude and

firmness, and, in another way, on the part of his will, on account of his greater promptitude, devotion, or confidence.'

[47] 'Etsi non habuerunt fidem explicitam, habuerunt tamen fidem implicitam in divina providentia, credentes Deum esse liberatorem hominum' (ST, II-II, q. 2, a. 7, ad 3).

[48] 'Implicite vel in praeparatione animi' (ST, II-II, q. 2, a. 5).

[49] 'Paratus est credere quidquid in divina Scriptura continetur' (Ibid.). Let me point out that being ready to believe whatever is taken to be revealed by God does not exclude the error. Aquinas is aware of the possibility that believers may mistake their own misunderstanding for divine revelation: 'It is possible for a believer to have a false opinion through a human conjecture, but it is quite impossible for a false opinion to be the outcome of faith' (ST, II-II, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3).

[50] Mt 21:31.

[51] '…est maius omnibus peccatis quae contingunt in perversitate morum' (ST, II-II, q. 10, a. 3).

[52] 'Though unbelievers sin in their rites, they may be tolerated, either on account of some good that ensues therefrom, or because of some evil avoided' (ST, II-II, q. 10, a. 11).

[53] This is the whole passage in which Aquinas explains his view: 'Ecclesia, de eius conversione non sperans, aliorum saluti providet, eum ab Ecclesia separando per excommunicationis sententiam; et ulterius relinquit eum iudicio saeculari a mundo exterminandum per mortem' (ST, II-II, q. 11, a. 3).

[54] 'Multo enim gravius est corrumpere fidem, per quam est animae vita, quam falsare pecuniam, per quam temporali vitae subvenitur. Unde si falsarii pecuniae, vel alii malefactores, statim per saeculares principes iuste morti traduntur; multo magis haeretici, statim cum de haeresi convincuntur, possent non solum excommunicari, sed et iuste occidi' (Ibid.).

[55] 'Omnis voluntas discordans a ratione, sive recta sive errante, semper est mala' (ST, I-II, q. 19, a. 5).

[56] 'Credere in Christum est per se bonum, et necessarium ad salutem, sed voluntas non fertur in hoc, nisi secundum quod a ratione proponitur. Unde si a ratione proponatur ut malum, voluntas feretur in hoc ut malum, non quia sit malum secundum se, sed quia est malum per accidens ex apprehensione rationis' (ST, I-II, q. 19, a. 5). In the same vein, Aquinas rejects the view that the children of unbelievers are to be baptized against their parent's will (see ST, II-II, q. 10, a. 12).

[57] '…fraterna correctio, quae ordinatur ad emendationem delinquentis' (ST, II-II, q. 33, a. 1).

[58] 'Cum enim fides infallibili veritati innitatur, impossibile autem sit de vero demonstrari contrarium, manifestum est probationes quae contra fidem inducuntur, non esse demonstrationes, sed solubilia argumenta' (ST, I, q. 1, a. 8)

[59] "Si quid ... in dictis philosophorum invenitur contrarium fidei, hoc non est philosophia, sed magis philosophiae abusus ex defectu rationis. Et ideo possibile est ex principiis philosophiae huiusmodi errorem refellere vel ostendendo omnino esse impossibile vel ostendendo non esse necessarium" (*Super Boethium de Trinitate*, 2, 3).

[60] 'Against the Jews we are able to argue by means of the Old Testament, while against heretics we are able to argue by means of the New Testament. But the Muslims and the pagans accept neither the one nor the other. We must, therefore, have recourse to the natural reason, to which all men are forced to give their assent.' (*Summa contra Gentiles*, tr. by A. Pegis [New York: Hanover House, 1955-57], I, 3).

[61] 'Nulla falsa doctrina est quae vera falsis non admisceat' (ST, I-II, q. 102, a. 5,ad 4).