**Personal or Non-Personal Divinity: A New Pluralist Approach**

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**ABSTRACT**

Religious disagreement – the existence of inconsistent religious views – is familiar and widespread. Among the most fundamental issues of such disagreement is whether to characterise the divine as personal or non-personal. On most other religious issues, the diverse views seem to presuppose some view on the personal/non-personal issue. In this essay, I address a particular question arising from disagreement over this issue. Let an *exclusivist* belief be a belief that a doctrine *d* on an issue is true, and that doctrines on the issue that differ from *d* are false. Assume that for at least some people, there is no epistemic reason to prefer any one exclusivist view on the personal/non-personal question. This might be because disagreements act as defeaters for disputants’ beliefs, or because someone comes at the question without already holding a belief on the matter, and finds each view equally plausible. In these circumstances, is it still possible to engage with particular traditions in a realist, truth-seeking way? I answer that it is, arguing for a new pluralist approach to the personal/non-personal issue. By ‘pluralist’, I mean an approach that reinterprets a doctrine *d* on a given issue to be consistent with doctrines on the issue that differ from *d*. I start with probably the best-known pluralist account of religion, that of John Hick. After presenting his account I identify a problem that it faces which any pluralist account must address, one that has clear relevance to the personal/non-personal question. I then draw on Thomas Merton to outline an alternative pluralist route, illustrating how such an approach can apply to Christian and Buddhist ideas of an ultimate spiritual goal. The personal/non-personal issue is a good test for the approach I develop: because of the issue’s fundamentality, if the approach succeeds here then the prospects look bright for applying it to other topics of religious disagreement.

**Introduction**

Religious disagreement – the existence of inconsistent religious views – is familiar and widespread. Among the most fundamental issues of such disagreement is whether to characterise the ultimate spiritual reality, or the ‘divine’, as personal or non-personal. On most other religious issues, the diverse views seem to presuppose some view on the personal/non-personal issue. In this essay, I address a particular question arising from disagreement over this issue. Let an *exclusivist* belief be a belief that a doctrine *d* on an issue is true, and that doctrines on the issue that differ from *d* are false.[[1]](#footnote-1) Assume that for at least some people, there is no sufficient epistemic reason to prefer one exclusivist view over another on the personal/non-personal question. This might be because particular disagreements can act as defeaters for disputants’ beliefs, or it might be because someone comes at the contrasting views without already holding a belief on the matter, and finds each view equally plausible. In these circumstances, is it still possible to engage with the thought and language of particular traditions in a realist, truth-seeking way? I answer that it is, arguing for a new pluralist approach to the personal/non-personal issue. By ‘pluralist’, I mean an approach that reinterprets a doctrine *d* on a given issue to be consistent with other doctrines on the issue that differ from *d*. I’ll start with probably the best-known and most fully developed pluralist account of religion, that of John Hick. After briefly presenting his account I’ll identify a problem that it faces which any pluralist account must address, one that has a clear bearing on the personal/non-personal question. I’ll then draw on Thomas Merton’s writings on Buddhism to outline an alternative pluralist route, illustrating how such an approach can apply to Christian and Buddhist ideas of an ultimate spiritual goal. As we’ll see, the personal/non-personal issue is a good test case for the approach I’ll develop: because of the issue’s fundamentality, if the approach can work in this case then the prospects look bright for applying it to other cases of religious disagreement.

**Hick’s pluralism and a general problem**

Hick asks what could account for the widespread and intractable differences in experience and belief between religious traditions. His answer is to posit an ultimate spiritual reality, the Real, which is experienced in various forms that are shaped by the conceptual lenses of particular religious traditions. However, the Real itself cannot be experienced directly, and is ‘transcategorial’: no human terms are literally true of it, because no ‘substantial’ human concepts (which would tell us something significant about the Real) apply to it positively or negatively. Still, the religious traditions that mediate the Real enable essentially the same salvific process for their participants: ‘the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness’.[[2]](#footnote-2) If Hick’s approach were successful, then when confronted with religious claims that contradict each other, we would have a way of reinterpreting them to make them consistent. We would understand each claim, or doctrine, as applying literally to the Real *as mediated* by some religious tradition. Since it can be mediated and appear in different ways, there is no contradiction in affirming all the different claims of the various religions.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Hick’s position has been much discussed, but here I focus on one problem that concerns whether the ultimate goal of the spiritual life, if there is such a thing, is personal or non-personal. This is the Real’s ‘transcategoriality’. The notion that no substantial human concepts apply to the Real positively or negatively ultimately leads to self-contradiction. We can see this by considering *contradictory pairs* of predicates, which are such that exactly one member of the pair must apply literally to any given subject. For instance, ‘is entirely yellow’ and ‘is not entirely yellow’ are mutually exclusive and exhaustive: something cannot be both and cannot be neither, but must be one or the other. Now, ‘is personal’ and ‘is non-personal’ looks very much like a contradictory predicate pair. Let’s take ‘personal’ in its theologically relevant sense to mean ‘self-aware’, i.e., having the knowledge of oneself *as* oneself that enables the use of the first-person pronoun. It is hard to see how something could be both self-aware and not self-aware. Self-awareness in this sense is not something that *part* of a thing can possess, like redness; if something is self-aware in virtue of one of its parts (if, say, a human is self-aware in virtue of its brain), then it is self-aware tout court. Likewise, it is hard to see how something could be *neither* self-aware *nor* not self-aware. What other possibilities are there? Thus, if we understand ‘personal’ as ‘self-aware’, it looks as though exactly one predicate from the pair ‘is personal’ and ‘is non-personal’ must be literally true of any given subject – including any ultimate spiritual reality there might be.[[4]](#footnote-4) Claiming that neither ‘personal’ nor ‘non-personal’ applies to the Real therefore leads to self-contradiction. For by claiming that ‘personal’ does not apply, we’re logically committed to holding that ‘non-personal’ *does* apply. Thus, if we also claim that ‘non-personal’ does *not* apply, we are committed to holding that ‘non-personal’ both does and does not apply.

Hick employs several analogies to solve the problem, none of which are to my mind successful. First, he compares the Real to non-controversial cases of a concept applying to something neither positively nor negatively; for instance, a molecule is not the sort of thing that can be either clever or stupid.[[5]](#footnote-5) But the analogy fails, since ‘clever’ and ‘stupid’ are not exhaustive, and so not contradictory: something can be neither clever nor stupid. ‘Personal’ and ‘non-personal’ *are* exhaustive: if something is not one then it is the other, so it can’t be neither. And it can’t be both. So these *are* contradictory predicates.

Second, Hick compares contradictory religious predicates to relational terms such as ‘large’ and ‘small’: such terms do not describe something in itself but rather describe something in relation to other things and to the perceiver. We experience a mountain as large or small depending on how far we are from it, but the mountain itself is neither: ‘[i]t is what it is’. Similarly, ‘the Real is what it is’, but is experienced in different, contradictory ways by different observers. Apparently contradictory religious predicates, such as ‘personal’ and ‘non-personal’, are to be understood relationally, rather than as describing the Real in itself.[[6]](#footnote-6) Unfortunately, this analogy also fails, for the simple reason that ‘personal’/‘non-personal’ are *not* relational terms like ‘large’/‘small’. Rather, in ordinary usage they refer to intrinsic properties, and it’s not clear how we might understand them relationally. Of course, we can say that something or someone *appears* to us in a personal or non-personal way. We can imagine an android that sometimes appears to exhibit self-awareness and sometimes appears to lack it, depending on how we interact with it. But the question would still remain whether the android was self-aware, was a personal being. And *this* could not be answered simply in terms of how it appeared to us; we would be asking for a description of its intrinsic nature. And now we are back to our problem: it must be one or the other.

Third, Hick draws an analogy between contradictory ways of describing the Real and the different ways that light is described in physics. When light is experimented on in different ways it behaves sometimes like a wave and sometimes like a particle. Likewise, when the Real is interacted with in different ways across different traditions, it appears sometimes as personal and sometimes as non-personal. In both cases, Hick suggests, a single reality can appear in different ways to the observer depending on the context.[[7]](#footnote-7) But again, the analogy fails. As we saw earlier, ‘personal’/‘non-personal’, unlike ‘wave’/‘particle’, cannot be used simply to describe behaviour. They refer to an intrinsic aspect of something. And, once again, ‘personal/non-personal’ are exhaustive: unlike the wave/particle distinction, something cannot be intrinsically neither, only *appearing* in each way to different religious participants.

The problem Hick faces here illustrates a more general difficulty for pluralist accounts of religion. How are we to ensure that we don’t unjustifiedly privilege any one way of characterising the divine, yet still engage with particular traditions in a realist, truth-seeking way? We’ve seen that, in attempting to avoid an unjustified preference for personal or non-personal characterisations, Hick claims that neither ‘personal’ nor ‘non-personal’ applies to the Real – resulting in self-contradiction. If we cannot make sense of Hick’s description of the Real, then we cannot make sense of the idea that the Real is mediated by different religious traditions. Thus, we cannot properly understand Hick’s account of how adherents can engage with these traditions in a realist, truth-seeking way. I’ll now sketch an approach that, I suggest, offers promise for overcoming this general difficulty.

**An alternative, two-part pluralist approach**

The attitude towards disputed doctrines that lies at the core of this approach is what I call *taking seriously*. This is to treat (part of) a religious outlook as inviting our attention, as drawing us into something not fully grasped. The approach as a whole has two parts.

The first part is a response to the sort of disagreement that concerns us, in which exclusivist belief is unjustified for someone. The situation places a requirement on someone not to hold either of the disputed views – in our case, either of the views on whether the divine is personal or non-personal. So, to borrow a term from Philip Quinn, in such a situation one should hold a ‘thinned’ set of beliefs.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, we must adapt Quinn’s use of the term, for he uses it about *contrary*, not contradictory, predicates. Like contradictory predicates, nothing can have both members of a pair of contraries; but unlike contradictories, something *can* lack both contraries (for instance, ‘is entirely yellow’ and ‘is entirely red’). Thus, when confronted with a disagreement over which predicate in a contrary pair applies to the divine, Quinn suggests that we postulate that neither predicate applies.[[9]](#footnote-9) But, as we’ve seen, this won’t work for *contradictory* pairs such as ‘personal’/‘non-personal’, since claiming that neither of a contradictory pair applies leads to self-contradiction.[[10]](#footnote-10) So, if neither belief on the personal/non-personal issue is a belief that one would be justified in holding, then one should simply hold no belief on the issue. In other words, one should believe a thinned set of literal claims, containing only those beliefs that do not entail any view on the issue. These will include any beliefs that are *shared* by all disputants. This approach can affirm that the contradictory predicate-pair ‘personal’/‘non-personal’ has one member that applies literally to the divine – and it thus avoids Hick’s self-contradiction. But given a disagreement of the kind I’ve described over which predicate applies, we should remain agnostic on the matter, not giving unwarranted victory to either concept. Moreover, even in the case of a *contrary* predicate-pair, the mere fact that neither member is such that one would be justified in favouring it does not, in itself, warrant the claim that neither of the predicates applies to the divine. It might be that one of them applies, or it might be that neither does. Without anything to guide us, we ought simply to withhold belief on this matter too.

Instead, when neither of two incompatible properties is one that we would be justified in attributing literally to the divine, we can reinterpret the predicates as *metaphors* that augment our thinned set of literal claims. This is the second part of the approach I propose here. In order to see how this can work, it’s worth noting two things about metaphors. First, a key role they play is to tell us about *x* by juxtaposing it with *y*, thereby drawing attention to aspects of *x* that resemble *y*. And second, an illuminating metaphor will be illuminating precisely because it has no exhaustive literal paraphrase. Any literal paraphrase would lose something of what the metaphor conveys – though it remains true that there will always be a literal *approximation*. For instance, to speak of a ‘biting’ or ‘cutting’ wind is to say more than simply that it stings: something in the image of biting or cutting is lost in the literal rephrasing.[[11]](#footnote-11) Metaphors thus contain content of their own that would not otherwise be conveyable.

Let’s return, then, to the religious pluralist approach that we’re developing. We have a thinned body of literal claims about the divine, which (in the case we’re considering) excludes any claim as to whether or not the divine is personal. By reinterpreting personal and non-personal characterisations of the divine metaphorically, we can understand them as expressing aspects of this divine reality that evade the literal descriptions in the thinned body of beliefs – though it remains true that in the literal descriptions we have approximations of what the metaphors convey. In this way, we can take both personal and non-personal characterisations seriously, letting them invite our attention and draw us into a possible reality that we don’t fully grasp. This might involve propositional belief: we believe metaphors insofar as what they express seems true, for instance that last night, after days of dry weather, the heavens opened.[[12]](#footnote-12) But taking the metaphors seriously needn’t involve believing them; it could simply be a matter of letting them shape our engagement with a possible divine reality at the imaginative and emotional levels. In any case, reinterpreting the claims metaphorically allows us to use the language of the traditions involved in a realist, truth-seeking way. Moreover, when confronted with religious claims that would contradict each other if taken literally, we can understand them in a way that makes them consistent. Because metaphors do not literally predicate concepts of a subject, in affirming contradictory predicates of a subject metaphorically we do not fall into contradiction. Rather, contrasting metaphors can illuminate different aspects of something. For instance, we do not contradict ourselves by metaphorically calling God both a lion and a rock; instead, we illuminate different aspects of God (his might and his steadfastness).

What are the prospects for applying this two-stage project to personal and non-personal concepts of the divine? Regarding the first stage, it may seem that given the relatively fundamental nature of the personal/non-personal question, it will be hard to find characterisations of the divine that do not presuppose any view on the issue. However, I think we can help matters by drawing on writers who have inhabited both ‘personalist’ and ‘non-personalist’ religious traditions. Such writers will be especially well placed to discern any ideas that traditions of these two kinds have in common. Here I’ll present just a few thoughts from one such figure, Thomas Merton, in order to illustrate the potential of this general approach when applied to the personal/non-personal question – and specifically to Christian and Buddhist concepts of the divine. In his essay ‘Nirvana’,[[13]](#footnote-13) Merton describes the Buddhist idea of Nirvana in a way that suggests features shared with Christian notions of knowing God. This will obviously be relevant to our project, since whatever else we may claim about Nirvana, it’s clear that it is not supposed to be a personal reality.

First, then, we thin out our beliefs about the divine to exclude any literal claim as to whether it is personal or non-personal. Working at a very general level, are there any beliefs shared by Christians and Buddhists that can survive this ‘thinning’ process? Here are some possibilities from Merton’s essay:

When man is grounded in authentic truth and love the roots of desire themselves wither, brokenness is at an end, and truth is found in…perfect awareness and perfect compassion. (p. 84)

[T]he ground of reality in which truth and peace are found (pp. 85–6)

Such love [involved in both attaining Nirvana and knowing God] begins only when the ego renounces its claim to absolute autonomy and ceases to live in a little kingdom of desires in which it is its own end and reason for existing. (p. 86)

Absolute Reality and Absolute Love (p. 86)

[T]he highest illumination of love is an explosion of the power of Love’s evidence in which all the psychological limits of an ‘experiencing’ subject are dissolved and what remains is the transcendent clarity of love itself, realized in the ego-less subject in a mystery beyond comprehension but not beyond consent. (pp. 86–7)

These quotations include descriptions both of an ultimate spiritual reality and of what is involved in attaining full awareness of that reality. Now we may question the extent to which Christians and Buddhists would recognise their own beliefs in these characterisations (the dissolution of the experiencing subject may be especially problematic for many Christians); but suppose that all adherents of these two religions would be happy with at least some of them. None of these descriptions obviously entails either personal or non-personal concepts of ultimate reality. So it seems that they offer possible ways to characterise that reality once we’ve thinned away beliefs on either side of the divide.

What about the second stage? Merton’s specifically Christian or Buddhist characterisations of ultimate reality lend themselves quite readily to metaphorical reinterpretation (even if he would not have intended this in all cases). For instance, ‘Pure Being is Infinite Giving’ (Christian), and ‘Absolute Emptiness is Absolute Compassion’ (Buddhist) (p. 86). The notion of gift may capture something of the experience of attaining the ultimate spiritual reality, both in one’s receipt of it and in how it prompts one to act. And Merton himself suggests that the notion of ‘emptiness’ must be taken metaphorically, to express the ultimate’s lack of boundedness or being limited to any particular thing in the world (p. 85). Or again, on the Christian side, Merton writes of ‘the Spirit of Love as the source of all that is and of all love’ (p. 86). The love that someone embodies when he comes to know ultimate reality may be metaphorically personified as a spirit, to emphasise the personal dimensions of a life lived in the knowledge of that reality.

It is worth making an additional point: understanding religious claims metaphorically on such a potentially large scale should not be a frightening prospect. The process of metaphorical reinterpretation proposed here merely extends, in two ways, a type of religious language that is already essential and widespread. First, it extends the already-large proportion of religious language *within* a given tradition that is understood metaphorically. For instance, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, as Janet Soskice has pointed out, ‘speak[s] for the most part metaphorically of God, or not at all’.[[14]](#footnote-14) In the sacred texts of Judaism, ‘God is compared to a lion, a king, a rock, stars, dew, clouds, fire, and a breast-feeding mother’. In the New Testament, Jesus is described as ‘the son of God, our High Priest, the King, shepherd, lamb of God’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Second, the approach I’ve sketched extends the range of metaphors that adherents of a tradition can acquire: specifically, it allows adherents of one tradition to incorporate into their metaphor-repertoire language from another tradition. Given how wide and varied the metaphors already are within particular traditions, a further widening of the range will hardly be at odds with the sort of thing we already see. Of course, it may not be the case that anything goes; there might be inappropriate metaphors for the divine. But when, in a religious disagreement, there is insufficient reason to prefer one (literally understood) claim over another, treating both claims metaphorically is a way of cultivating openness to both traditions – thus increasing one’s chances of finding truth wherever it may lie.

**Conclusions**

I’ve been concerned here with the general kind of religious disagreement in which there is insufficient reason to prefer one view over another. More specifically, I’ve looked at disagreements over whether the divine is personal or non-personal. Using this issue as a test case, I’ve outlined an approach for engaging with religious traditions in a realist, truth-seeking way when there is no way of deciding between inconsistent claims. Thin your literal beliefs down to those that don’t entail any view on the disputed issue; included in the thinned set will be any beliefs shared by all disputants. Thus, when faced with a contradictory predicate pair, you can avoid self-contradiction by accepting that one of the predicates applies literally to the divine – even though you withhold belief over *which* predicate applies. Then reinterpret the disputed claims metaphorically. Drawing on Thomas Merton, I’ve illustrated how the approach may be applied to Christian and Buddhist personal and non-personal concepts of the divine. The personal/non-personal dispute is one of the most fundamental religious disagreements. Thus, if the approach can succeed on this issue, then the prospects look bright for applying it to other religious disagreements, where there will likely be more common ground between disputants.

1. In contrast to the ‘salvific exclusivist’ view that only members of one tradition can achieve salvation. For a classification of responses to religious diversity, see Robert McKim, *On Religious Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), ch. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 240. For a presentation of the ‘pluralistic hypothesis’, see ch. 14; for an overview and discussion of the hypothesis, see the Introduction to the second edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I’ve presented just one interpretation of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis; for a discussion of two possible interpretations, see Philip L. Quinn, ‘Towards Thinner Theologies: Hick and Alston on Religious Diversity’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38, no. 1 (1995), pp. 145–164, at pp. 147–8. My discussion of Hick that follows does not depend on any one interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See William L. Rowe, ‘Religious Pluralism’, *Religious Studies* 35, no. 2 (1999), pp. 139–150. See also Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 45, referenced in Hick, *An* *Interpretation of Religion*, p. xxi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. xx­–xxi. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., pp. xxiv–xxv. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hick, ‘In Defence of Religious Pluralism’, in his *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1985), ch. 7, at pp. 98–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Quinn, ‘Towards Thinner Theologies’, esp. p. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Quinn suggests a ‘charitable reading’ of Hick, on which being personal and being non-personal are contraries, not contradictories, and hence that the Real can lack both members of the pair (ibid., pp. 150 and 164, n. 7). But, as I argued above, this seems untenable. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Sebastian Gäb, ‘Metaphor and Theological Realism’, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6, no. 1 (2014), pp. 79–92, at p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a convincing argument that metaphors do indeed have propositional content even though it cannot be expressed literally, see ibid., sec. III. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Thomas Merton, ‘Nirvana’, in his *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*(New York, NY: New Directions, 1968), ch. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Janet Martin Soskice, ‘Theological Realism’, in *The Rationality of Religious Belief: Essays in Honour of Basil Mitchell*, ed. William J. Abraham and Steven W. Holtzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), ch. 7, at p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)