

The incompatibility problem and religious pluralism beyond Hick

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ABSTRACT

Religious pluralism is the view that more than one religion is correct, and that no religion enjoys a special status in relation to the ultimate. Yet the world religions appear to be incompatible. How, then, can more than one be correct? Discussions and critiques of religious pluralism usually focus on the work of John Hick, yet there are a number of other pluralists whose responses to this incompatibility problem are importantly different from Hick's. This article surveys the solutions of Hick, Harrison, Heim, Byrne, and Knitter to the incompatibility problem. I conclude that, while none of these views is without weakness, there are several promising pluralist solutions to this problem. Moreover, confessionalists (i.e. exclusivists and inclusivists) must also address issues related to incompatibility.

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Religious pluralismⁱ is the view that more than one religion is correct, and that no religion enjoys a special status in relation to the ultimate. Religious pluralists (henceforth ‘pluralists’ unless context demands greater precision) appear to have two central motivations. First, pluralists find value and connectedness with the transcendent in the religious experiences and moral teachings of many established religions. Second, pluralists want to preserve the integrity and dignity of established religions, especially in the context of a history of religious violence, oppression, and colonialism. The various attempts to develop pluralism have been intensely contested both by those who think that they are misguided in intent and by those who think that they fail to be sufficiently pluralistic. In this article, I outline various pluralist responsesⁱⁱ to one of the main objections to pluralism: the incompatibility problem.

The incompatibility problem lies in the fact that the world religions appear to be incompatible, yet religious pluralists assert that more than one of them is correct.

Discussions and critiques of religious pluralism usually focus on the work of John Hick, but there are a number of other pluralists whose responses to the incompatibility problem are importantly different from Hick’s. Accordingly, this article surveys the solutions of Hick, Harrison, Heim, Byrne, and Knitter. I conclude that, while none of these views is without weakness, there are several promising pluralist solutions to the incompatibility problem.

Moreover, those opposing pluralism have an incompatibility problem of their own.

1 Preliminaries

Pluralism is opposed to exclusivism and inclusivism in the prevalent tripartite typology due to Alan Race (*Christians and Religious Pluralism*). *Exclusivists* hold that one religion is correct,

presumably, their own. Exclusivists don't need to be close-minded. They can admit that their own tradition is incorrect about some things (albeit not items of central doctrine) and that there are truths in other religions that are simply not mentioned in their own (Stenmark, King). *Inclusivists* acknowledge substantial and thorough correctness of some sort in religions other than their own (for example, a saving effect). Inclusivists analyze this correctness in terms of their own religion. The most famous example of this is Karl Rahner's doctrine of 'anonymous Christians', good hearted and devout people of non-Christian religions who are saved by Jesus because of their works and their devotion to their respective faiths (*Foundations*). The religious traditions of anonymous Christians provide the path to salvation and include many true doctrines, but they do so because the salvific efficacy of Jesus extends universally, beyond the confines of Christianity. *Confessionals* is a useful term to describe both exclusivists and inclusivists because they are committed to an asymmetry among religions, with their own having special status. *Pluralists* reject this asymmetry. They claim both that more than one world religion is correct, and that the correctness of each of them is not due to the correctness of any other religion. Pluralists do not usually think that all religions are correct – there are some sketchy religions out there! – so they must articulate a distinction between religions that are part of the pluralistic truth and those that are excluded.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is important to understand that what is meant by "correct" here depends on whose view is being discussed. Exclusivists take the correctness of a religion to mean that it makes mostly true claims about the transcendent, while some pluralists have a sense of correctness that allows that a religion can be acknowledged as correct without making many or even any

claims about the transcendent that are known to be true. I will note as carefully as possible what is meant by this term in the context of each author's views.

Race's typology takes religions to be unified things which are reasonable units of analysis, just as the claim that there is a high degree of parity among NFL teams requires it to make sense to talk about NFL teams as such things. But it's unclear whether religions are unified in this way. This observation has been made by confessionalists such as van Inwagen, who argues that there is no such thing as religion, and thus that he cannot begin to understand the thesis of pluralism (or, presumably, that of inclusivism), although there is such a thing as the Church, so he can understand what it is to be an exclusivist who is a member of that Church (*Non est Hick*). It has also been made by pluralists such as Fletcher, who argues that to take the world religions as objects of analysis is to lump people with very different identities into a single category ('Shifting Identities'). For ease of exposition I will continue to write about religions; anyone who is convinced by arguments against the existence of religions as unified objects of analysis can replace talk of religions with talk of the sets of truth claims about the transcendent made by individuals.

A related issue, as Cantwell Smith and others have pointed out, is that it seems there are many more religions than we might suppose due to the extraordinary amount of intrareligious disagreement (*The Meaning and End of Religion*). Within, say, orthodox Judaism or Presbyterian Christianity, there are a number of fundamental disagreements about ultimate reality. Even a heavily doctrinal and structured religion like Roman Catholicism is faced with disagreement about questions of interpretation related to church doctrine. We can conclude that saying that a person belongs to any one of the world religions conveys very

little information about them (Arpaly 111-12). Cantwell Smith and others think that intrareligious differences are sufficiently significant that we should talk about “religious traditions” rather than religions, to “Christianities” rather than Christianity, etc. Since Race’s typology can accommodate Cantwell Smith’s view, I will not discuss this issue further.

2 The incompatibility problem

For many philosophers, the most salient question about religious pluralism is how it resolves the fact that religions appear to make incompatible doctrinal claims about ultimate reality. Christians claim that Jesus is the resurrected Messiah and that God has three aspects; Jews and Muslims deny these claims. Jews, Christians, and Muslims claim that a personal God exists; Buddhists and many Hindus deny this. Buddhists and Hindus claim that humans are typically reborn on this earth after death; the Abrahamic religions reject this. And so on. Prima facie, it is hard to see how religions that make incompatible claims about the world can all be correct. The principle of non-contradiction claims that it cannot be the case both that p and not- p . Pluralism appears to violate this principle by its very nature.

What is less often observed is that confessionalists have their own version of the incompatibility problem. In each religion there are different denominations that make incompatible claims. Unless confessionalists want to acknowledge as correct only one specific interpretation of one denomination of one religion – a move perilously close to religious solipsism, for it is hard to imagine even two people agreeing on the interpretation of every doctrinal claim – they must allow that incompatible denominations (or

interpretations thereof) are correct. Like pluralists, non-solipsistic confessionals appear to violate the principle of non-contradiction by the very nature of their view.

In both of these cases, appearances are misleading. First, consider what it might mean for a denomination (or interpretation thereof) to be correct. In addition to practices, norms of worship and conduct, symbols, and forms of community, there are sets of propositions associated with each denomination. The idea that *all* propositions associated with a denomination need to be true in order for that denomination to be correct will lead us to religious solipsism. It seems much more plausible to maintain that for a denomination to be correct, most of the central, core propositions associated with it must be true. We must decide for a given denomination that makes claims ϕ which subset(s) of claims in ϕ must be true in order for the denomination to be correct. Now, consider two denominations Q and R committed to the sets of claims ϕ_Q and ϕ_R , where ϕ_Q and ϕ_R are incompatible. There could be subsets q and r of ϕ_Q and ϕ_R such that (1) the truth of the claims in q is sufficient for the correctness of Q ; (2) the truth of the claims in r is sufficient for the correctness of R ; and (3) q and r are compatible. In other words, Q and R are incompatible, but in a way that does not pose an obstacle to both being correct.

Pluralists may similarly reject the inference from “religions X and Y make incompatible doctrinal claims” to “ X and Y cannot both be correct.” Confessionals may try to resist this cooption of their strategy on the grounds that in the case of different religions, there will not be compatible subsets x and y , the truth of which is sufficient for the correctness of X and Y respectively. For example, they may argue that if Buddhism is correct, Christianity is incorrect on the following grounds. If Buddhism is correct, (i) there is not a personal God,

and (ii) *a fortiori* there is not a human who is the incarnation of God – and there is no set of claims whose truth is sufficient for the correctness of Christianity which does not contain (i) or (ii). Yet a self-professed Christian might either deny that Jesus was the incarnation of a personal God, or have an understanding of such incarnation compatible with Buddhist doctrine. Confessionalists would presumably reject such religious self-identification, but adequate, non-question-begging reasons must be given for doing so. This issue deserves greater attention in the literature: how do confessionalists who reject pluralism because of the incompatibility problem explain how incompatible denominations – but not incompatible religions – can be correct?

Although it might be possible for pluralists to argue persuasively that the incompatibility problem can be fully resolved by the confessionalist's strategy, most pluralists employ this strategy as a supplement to other strategies. Thus they seem to agree both with the confessionalist that the gap between different religions cannot be addressed simply by having a flexible understanding of religious belonging, and with Ward that pluralism involves somehow acknowledging the truth of mutually inconsistent fundamental beliefs (3). A further solution is then required.

I divide pluralist strategies to the incompatibility problem into three broad categories: ontological pluralism, perspectivalism, and pragmatism.^{iv} Ontological pluralists do not accept the principle of noncontradiction, holding that there is something deeply pluralistic about reality itself. Perspectivalists accept the principle of noncontradiction and maintain that apparent incompatibilities are merely apparent and due to differences in perspectives. Pragmatists accept the principle of non-contradiction and take the truth of religious claims

to consist in whether they are efficacious in achieving the soteriological goals of the religion rather than in whether they correspond to transcendent religious objects. This allows pragmatists to reject the idea that apparently incompatible doctrines cannot be true.

In what follows, I discuss several notable versions of perspectivalism and pragmatism. Ontological pluralism is a deeply complex view, and there is not here sufficient space to discuss it. The reader is referred to the work of Panikkar (*Unknown Christ*), Drew ('Reconsidering'), and Cobb ('Whiteheadian Assumptions') and Griffin ('Complementary Pluralism'), as well as clarifying scholarship by Knitter (*No Other Name?*) and Min ('Loving Without Understanding').

3 Perspectivalism

Hick

Most famously, John Hick (*Interpretation*) has relied on the Kantian distinction between the noumenal world – the world as it is independently of our ways of perceiving and cognizing – and the phenomenal world – the noumenal world as it appears to us given our ways of perceiving and cognizing.^v Now, Kant did not have pluralist inclinations. Rather, he was interested in understanding how we could have a priori knowledge of aspects of the structure of the world; he concluded that the only way this is possible is if we have knowledge of the world as it is partially constituted by us. Kant held that humans have exactly one way of experiencing the world. He leaves the door open as to whether different sorts of rational creatures might perceive and cognize the world differently. He didn't seem to think much about aliens, but if he did, he perhaps would have allowed that intelligent

aliens might perceive and cognize the world differently than humans, thus resulting in a pluralistic view about metaphysical issues such as causation. It is this opening which Hick exploits. Hick claims that divine reality – which he calls the ‘Real’ – cannot be substantially known or conceived of as it is in itself, although we can attribute formal properties to it such as ‘is self-identical’ or ‘can be referred to’ (239). Adherents to various religions experience the Real as mediated by their religious and cultural understandings (14). Through this Kantian mechanism, Hick purports to achieve symmetry among the world religions. None of them are descriptive of the Real in itself, but they all have an understanding of the Real as mediated by the concepts of their respective traditions. Apparently incompatible claims made by different religions about the Real are noumenally false (because they do not describe the Real as it is in itself) but phenomenally true. Contradiction is avoided because the phenomenal truth is indexed to different religious realms. For example, ‘God is tripartite’ is true of the Real as experienced by Christians, whereas ‘God is unitary’ is true of the Real as experienced by Muslims. Hick has been criticized on the grounds that he preserves the truth of different religions’ claims about the Real at the cost of losing ultimacy – for on his view religious claims are not true of the Real as it is in itself. However, it is worth noting that Kant takes the phenomenal world to be the world of science, the laws of nature, and causality: it is, in brief, *our* world. The phenomenal truth of religious claims may not make them ultimate, but it does give them profound reality from a Kantian perspective.

Hick applies his Kantian solution only to theological disputes between religions (e.g. how many parts God has; whether God is personal; etc.). In practical, historical, and applied metaphysical disagreements, Hick allows asymmetry among religions: someone is right and someone is wrong (*Problems*). However, Hick thinks that it doesn’t matter who is right or

wrong in these areas. He evaluates the correctness of a religion beyond the phenomenal truth of its theological claims by means of the touchstone of salvation: the fundamental ethical transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Hick holds that all religions with which he is concerned agree with this understanding of salvation. Since practical, historical, and applied metaphysical disagreements do not matter when it comes to salvation, it does not undermine Hick's pluralism to allow asymmetry regarding them.

Critiques of Hick are plentiful. Rowe ('Religious Pluralism'), Byrne ('Hick's Philosophy'), Baillie ('New Problems'), Surin ('Politics of Speech'), and D'Costa ('Impossibility') are good places to start. Hick has been criticized by pluralists as well as by confessionalists. These pluralists have developed their positions in ways significantly different from Hick, yet Hick's influence is such that these pluralists' views are often passed over in the literature. In part to remedy this, the remainder of this article is concerned with pluralists other than Hick.

Harrison

Victoria Harrison ('Problem of Religious Diversity', 'Ontology') develops a model of what she calls "internalist pluralism" by applying Hilary Putnam's internal realism (*Reason, Truth and History*) to religious diversity.^{vi} Putnam rejects the idea of a "God's eye view," i.e. a privileged perspective containing all and only the truths about the world. According to internal realism, the notion of truth does not make sense outside of a conceptual scheme as it would be developed under conditions of ideal inquiry (i.e., ideal observers with abundant intelligence, data, and the time needed to apply the former fully to the later). This leads Putnam to hold that some versions of global skepticism are incoherent, for they posit that the world is radically different from the way that existing thinkers suppose it to be in a way

that they could never discover. Since Putnam rejects the coherence of the idea of truths which outrun our ability to know them, he would consider Hick's attempt to refer to the noumenal Real to be an incoherent attempt to invoke the God's eye view, even if Hick is only trying to say that there is something there to answer to our inadequate concepts of divinity.

Putnam does not have a verificationist conception of truth according to which what is true relative to a conceptual scheme is identified with what ideal inquirers would conclude after investigating the world proceeding from that conceptual scheme. But he does reject the idea that truth is "radically non-epistemic" (*Meaning* 125), and he thinks "truth and rational acceptability are *interdependent* notions" (*Representation and Reality* 115). One of Putnam's examples of how truth connects with conceptual schemes is based on Maxwell field theory and retarded potential theory (*Reason, Truth, and History* 73). He thinks that both of these, after ideal inquiry, could lead to different ideal theories, and that it doesn't make sense to ask which of these ideal theories is *really* true, because there is no such thing as truth from the God's eye view. Maxwell field theory is true_{MFT} and retarded potential theory is true_{RPT}.

In Harrison's application of Putnam's view to religious pluralism, apparently incompatible religions can be true relative to their respective conceptual schemes. For example, it might be that ideal inquiry starting from the Christian conceptual scheme would come to the conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, and ideal inquiry based on the Islamic conceptual scheme would come to the conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth is not the Messiah. Both claims would be true, but they would not be incompatible because they would be true relative to different conceptual schemes. Moreover, it does not make sense to ask which is

really true. Interestingly, for internalist pluralism, the incoherence of the idea of ‘the world as God sees it’ leads to the possibility of religious pluralism.

Internalist pluralism may seem to be close to a kind of relativism, according to which each religion is true according to a truth predicate relativized to that religion (cf. Runzo, *World Views*, ‘Pluralism and Relativism’). However, the views are not equivalent, because internalist pluralism relates the notion of truth to ideal inquiry. We can’t simply read off what is true from claims embedded in conceptual schemes. Rather, the world plays a crucial role (Harrison, ‘Problem of Religious Diversity’ 293-294). It might be that ideal inquiry beginning from a Christian conceptual scheme ends up rejecting the idea that the Christian God exists (say, because the problem of evil turns out to be insoluble). Therefore we cannot say that the Christian God exists just because Christians currently claim that this is so. Truth is not radically non-epistemic, but it can depart radically from current belief.

To establish the truth of internalist pluralism, Harrison would have to show, not only that Putnam’s internal realism is correct, but also that multiple religions would have their essential doctrines upheld through the process of ideal inquiry beginning from their respective conceptual schemes. Harrison recognizes this and asserts that her goal is only to show the possibility that internalist pluralism is true.

A further issue has to do with whether Harrison can characterize atheism, pluralism, and exclusivism as opposed views without appeal to the God’s eye view. Harrison claims that, according to internalist pluralism, atheism is the view that no religious conceptual scheme successfully refers to a non-human agent (‘Ontology’ 107). This definition should be refined

in order to include non-theist faiths. However it is refined, it will talk about different conceptual schemes, and thus must be evaluated in reference to a meta-conceptual scheme which takes as its object the various religious conceptual schemes (see ‘Problem of Religious Diversity’ 298-300). However, there is more than one possible meta-conceptual scheme here:

- Atheism: no religious conceptual scheme successfully refers (except to non-religious entities).
- Exclusivism: exactly one religious conceptual scheme successfully refers (in its religious claims).
- Religious pluralism: more than one religious conceptual scheme successfully refers (in their religious claims).

The debate between these meta-conceptual schemes cannot be about what is true from the God’s eye view. If it is about what is true from the standpoint of each of these schemes, then they might all be correct: atheism might be true_a, exclusivism might be true_e, and pluralism might be true_p. We now have a meta-pluralism, whereby all the positions in the religious pluralism debate have the possibility of being true. But of course, there is also meta-atheism, the view that atheism is the only meta-conceptual scheme which...etc. It looks like, according to internalist pluralism, it might not make sense to ask who is *really* correct, the atheist, pluralist, inclusivist, or exclusivist. It is unclear whether Harrison can make sense of the debate between pluralism and its opponents because she cannot appeal to what in fact is true about the reference of various religious conceptual schemes from the God’s eye view.

Heim

S. Mark Heim develops a version of perspectivalism in his theory of multiple salvations while taking issue with Hick’s approach. According to Heim, the weakness of Hick’s view is that the same salvation – the transition from self-regarding to Reality-regarding – is posited as the end of all religions, conforming different religions into the same mold (*Salvations* 129).

Instead, Heim allows that followers of different religions have their own distinct salvations, and may all achieve them. Buddhists may realize nirvana, while Christians are saved by Jesus, and so on. His view is that there is no more contradiction in holding that this is the case than there is in holding that, say, different architects who are pursuing different goals in their buildings (sustainability, avant-garde design, durability) might each accomplish their respective goals (for this image, see Fridlund). Heim's view is based on Rescher's orientational pluralism, which Rescher developed in order to deal with the problem of seemingly irreducible disagreement in philosophy (*The Strife of Systems*). According to orientational pluralism, values are an ineliminable part of inquiry. Yet once a particular set of values is chosen, rationality determines a single best conclusion ('Salvations' 344). Heim extends this to salvation: once a particular form of salvation is chosen, there is a single best means to achieving that salvation. For example, if one chooses nirvana, then Buddhism is the best route.

Like Hick, Heim allows that ultimate reality is noumenal and cannot be known. He claims that, unlike Hick, he takes this to its natural end: we can't know whether more than one salvation exists, and whether multiple salvations are underpinned by one noumenal Real or by multiple "religiously significant" realities (346). In light of our lack of knowledge of the noumenal, what matters to Heim is the concrete instantiation of multiple salvations. Importantly, he claims that the experience of different salvations can be realized without their respective truth claims being true (*Salvations* 154). This is how Heim manages incompatibility. He acknowledges that multiple salvations are real, but he remains agnostic about the means by which they are made real, and so is not committed to the sometimes

incompatible truth claims made by different religions about the conditions of their respective salvations.

While he attempts to be more pluralistic than Hick in admitting the possibility of multiple salvations, Heim has a strong component of inclusivism in his view. From the perspective of a given end, that end is to be preferred above others, and there is one correct way of maximally pursuing it. Since Heim has his own perspective – Christianity – he is committed to this perspective being the maximally efficient means of pursuing the goal of Christian salvation. For Heim, non-Christian salvations are (1) not as good as Christian salvation, and (2) effected in some way by the reality of Christianity (“Salvations’ 348). What distinguishes this from standard inclusivism is that Heim allows that all religions correctly perceive things this way from their respective perspectives:

There is no reason to avoid [the above] judgment, as long as we grasp that others make reciprocal judgments. The new factor we have added to the picture is the expectation, to be tested by encounter, that these reciprocal judgments can be grounded in their own distinct religious fulfillments. (348)

Simply to acknowledge that others disagree is compatible with exclusivism. Heim’s addition here is the expectation that others’ reciprocal judgments “can be grounded in their own distinct religious fulfillments.” However, to be distinct from standard inclusivism, this grounding can’t be from Heim’s Christian perspective. Therefore, it must be grounded in the correctness of the other religion. And of course, from this perspective, Christian salvation is less desirable and is parasitic on the truth of that religion. To my ears, this threatens to raise a kind of Moorean paradox. G.E. Moore raised the issue of whether the claim “*p*; but I do not believe that *p*” is coherent. Similarly, Heim’s view might make us worry that the

following utterance is incoherent: “My chosen salvation is superior to other salvations, and my chosen religion is the best way to achieve it; but of course, others will rightly find their chosen salvation superior to mine, and they rightly consider their religion to be the best means of achieving it.”

Byrne

Peter Byrne (*Prolegomena*) lays out minimal conditions required for religious pluralism. Like Harrison, Byrne does not take himself to have established the truth of religious pluralism; rather, he takes himself to have provided a model of it and shown what needs to be the case for it to be coherent. Byrne’s work draws on a wide variety of material in epistemology, philosophy of language, and the philosophy of science as well as the philosophy of religion. To address the issue of incompatibility, he takes inspiration from the use of causal descriptivist accounts of reference in the philosophy of science. According to descriptivist theories of reference, the reference of terms is fixed by descriptions associated with the corresponding concepts. For example, ‘cat’ refers to cats because we take ‘cat’ to refer to mammalian four-legged feline predators. During the 20th century, descriptivist accounts were rejected in favor of causal theories of reference by many philosophers. On causal theories of reference, words refer to whatever normally causes us to utter them, even if the description the speaker associates with the term is false. So, for example, when ancient Greeks spoke of water, they referred to water, even though they thought incorrectly that water was elemental, because water was in fact the thing that caused them to speak of water. The motivation for causal theories of reference is that it seems we can refer even if our associated description is false, as in the example of the Greeks (Putnam, ‘Meaning and Reference’, Kripke). Byrne rejects a purely causal theory of reference because it would preserve reference even in cases

where we are so completely mistaken about something that we are wrong even about the category to which it belongs (*Prolegomena* 44). For example, if the causal theory of reference is true and utterances of ‘witches’ were in fact caused by women who were independent of men and the church, then ‘witches’ would refer to such women; whereas we reject the idea that ‘witches’ refers to anything. Byrne’s causal descriptivism requires the speaker to establish “cognitive contact” with the referent, which requires at least “that the speaker is able to locate the object in some rough category or kind” (44). Yet neither the speaker nor subsequent people whose reference depends on that of the first speakers need to have a true description of the object.

Byrne argues that his causal descriptivism allows people from different religions with different descriptions of a transcendent reality to refer successfully to the same entity. Their descriptions do not always agree; yet there is enough truth in each description such that each religion provides “a revisable, limited, relative but nonetheless valuable attempt to put human beings in contact with a sacred, transcendent reality” (32). For Byrne, each tradition offers part of the truth about the transcendent. Like Hick’s Kantianism, Byrne’s strategy is limited to discussion of the transcendent. He allows that there are other incompatibilities about doctrine; he solves this problem by taking agnosticism about such issues to be a defining feature of pluralism (6).

Byrne’s only descriptivist requirement for reference is “cognitive contact” involving the sorting of an object into the proper category – in the case of religion, this might be “the transcendent” or “the divine.” This means that almost all of the theoretical beliefs of the various religions about the object of religious attitudes might be false. For Hick, the

correctness of a religion lies in the phenomenal truth of its claims about the transcendent as well as its ability to provide salvation. For Byrne, correctness lies in reference alone. Would we really say that a religion is correct if all that it does is recognize the divine as divine? For more on this, see Byrne's exploration of divine hiddenness (167-190; for another account of the epistemic implications of divine hiddenness, see McKim).

4 Pragmatism

Knitter

Pragmatists take the truth of religious language and doctrines to consist in their efficacy.

Knitter asserts that different religions have a common soteriological direction best pursued through liberation-oriented interfaith dialogue (*One Earth*, 32-33). According to Knitter (*One Earth*), "correlational dialogue" is:

carried out in an *egalitarian*, not a hierarchical, community. Though all religious participants will speak their mind and make truth claims to each other, none of them will do so from a theological position that claims that theirs is the religion meant to dominate or absorb or stand in judgment over all others. (16)

Knitter is open to inconsistencies being settled one way or another in the course of dialogue, but rejects entering into dialogue with a pre-conceived notion of where it will end:

In the dialogue a particular religious belief or practice may be corrected or fulfilled in another; but that will happen *as a result of the dialogue*, not because it is dictated by a theological master plan. (16)

The fundamentally important soteriological direction of the correlational dialogues between religions is taking "global responsibility for eco-human well-being," and members of the world religions have symmetrical positions in this project (17).

As with Heim, there might be Moorean worries here: making truth claims does seem to entail thinking that incompatible truth claims made by other religions are false, which can be interpreted as “standing in judgment” over others. But Knitter avoids incompatibility by employing a pragmatic notion of truth. He takes religious language to be symbolic and performative, directed at the goal of eco-human well-being. If the doctrines of a religion support the achievement of this goal, then they are true, because it is precisely their function to do so. Thus, for Knitter, the correctness of a religion consists in its contributing to human actions leading to environmental and human justice.

In his most recent work (*Without Buddha*), Knitter has explored the phenomenon of multiple belonging: membership in multiple faiths by a single individual (214-216). In multiple belonging, apparent incompatibilities between different religions are overcome by individual spiritual exploration and commitment. In Knitter’s case, he pronounces the Bodhisattva Vows (216), which is incompatible with his Christianity according to some models of Christianity. One might argue that multiple belonging does nothing to vindicate religious pluralism from the problem of incompatibility, because each individually negotiated self-consistent set of practices and doctrine can be considered a religion unto itself. All that has been achieved is the creation of *more* religious disagreement. But Knitter’s goal is not to endorse idiosyncratic faiths. Rather, it is to make the case that pronouncing the Bodhisattva Vows is compatible with the practice of Catholic Christianity. Knitter’s defense of the coherence and spiritual integrity of his lived pluralist experience to his own community represents a deeply personal approach to the incompatibility problem. By making these apparently incompatible religions work in his own life while remaining faithful to the

traditions of both religions, he shows that – at least on the pragmatist model – they are compatible.

5 Conclusion: the particularity problem

I conclude by briefly discussing another objection to pluralism: the particularity problem.

This critique of pluralism has to do with how pluralism can be embraced without undermining the meaningfulness or rationality of adopting a particular faith. The particularity problem has been stated in many forms: pluralists are starting a new religion, not affirming existing religions; in their quest for universality, pluralists whitewash differences among religions, forming conceptions of other religions unduly informed by their home religions;^{vii} and pluralists are really exclusivists, for in expecting others to adopt pluralism they deny the self-understanding of most people from the world religious traditions, namely that their own religion possesses the unique correct perspective on the transcendent. This line of critique has been developed both by confessionalists (D’Costa, ‘Impossibility’; Surin and other authors from D’Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*; but cf. Donovan) and by fellow pluralists who find these pluralists’ views less than fully pluralistic (Heim, *Salvations*).

If one holds multiple religions to be correct, in what sense can one be an adherent to one but not another? Two possibilities come to mind. One is that the pluralist could admit that it doesn’t make sense for *pluralists* to adopt a particular faith, but *non-pluralists* could—and so it does make sense, if pluralism is true, to adopt a particular faith as long as one does not oneself *believe* that pluralism is true. This approach is elitist, as it separates the views of intellectuals who know how things really stand from the understandings of “common

believers.” While being elitist does not make it false, it does makes it contrary to the pluralist motivation of validating the religious thinking and experience of the world’s people of faith. A maneuver more conducive to pluralism is to hold that taking a religion to be correct is not the same thing as adhering to it. I can believe that Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism are correct, but still *be* only one of these. To say “I am a Christian, yet I believe that Islam is true” may sound like a contradiction, but it is not, as adhering to a religion requires more than belief—for example, it involves actually *taking* Jesus to be one’s Lord and Savior, or *submitting* oneself to God’s commands in the Qur’an.

If this is right, it may be coherent for pluralists to adhere to a single religion. But on what basis should they? Taking all religions to be true threatens to makes one’s selection of a religion unimportant. Why be Muslim rather than Christian if both are equal routes to the transcendent? The answer of “cultural convenience” does not accurately reflect the felt urgency of the choice and the resulting depth of commitment. Heim claims that since a particular believer has decided upon a particular salvation, it makes sense for that believer to pursue the most efficacious route to that salvation, which is her own faith. This is so, even if (as a Heimian) she believes that others have equally legitimate salvations that they are pursuing through their own faiths. But we might ask Heim: on what grounds should we choose the salvation? Harrison can claim that from the standpoint of a believer’s conceptual scheme, it makes perfect sense to adhere to the particular faith that she endorses (‘Problem of Religious Diversity’ 296). From within a conceptual scheme, the differences between faiths *really matter*—and the believer risks getting things wrong if she doesn’t stick to her faith. But we might ask Harrison: how do we decide which conceptual scheme to adopt?

Hick seems especially challenged by this problem. If one is a committed Hickian, one must explain why one would adhere to a particular religion rather than taking a cafeteria-style approach to various transformative practices while not bothering oneself with adhering to any one religion. One answer Hick can give is that the transformative practices – and the religious experiences of the Real – can't be realized without being fully embedded in the other aspects of the religion. In other words, it really matters *for Christians* that Jesus rose from the dead, but the historical dispute about the resurrection between Christians and Jews doesn't matter vis-à-vis the ability of those two faiths to mediate salvific transformation and experience of the Real.

Part of the particularity objection involves the idea that pluralism is incompatible with the self-understandings of many people of faith. Yet pluralists can claim that they are embarking on a revisionist project demanded by the growing understanding of the nature of other global faiths. Henceforth, belonging to a particular faith may look different than it has in the past; perhaps we should not defer fully to what we take to be the self-understandings of the “common believer.” Gaybba makes a powerful analogy between the revision required by reflection on global religion and the revision of the Jewish concept of monotheism undertaken by early Christians struggling with their understanding of Jesus as God incarnate, resulting in the doctrine of the Trinity (7). I hope to have illustrated part of the richness and breadth of pluralist responses to the incompatibility problem. It remains to be seen whether the goals of pluralists can be fully theoretically realized and given life in the faiths of the world's religious believers.

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NOTES

ⁱ The phrase “religious pluralism” is used to refer to a wide variety of doctrines ranging from the descriptive view that in our societies there are many religions to the political view that the state should respect and value differences in religious affiliation to the ethical view that religious people should inform themselves about other religions and engage in interfaith dialogue. I restrict my discussion to the philosophical view defined here.

ⁱⁱ Perhaps because of its historically exclusivist nature, the home religion of many religious pluralists is Christianity, including the ones surveyed here. Readers interested in beginning to explore non-Christian forms of pluralism are referred to Aydin (“Religious Pluralism”) and the contributors to Knitter’s *The Myth of Religious Superiority* and Meister’s *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Race’s typology has been extensively criticized (see DiNoia, Ogden, D’Costa, ‘Impossibility’ and *Religions and the Trinity*; for a defense, see Schmidt-Leukel). It is difficult to characterize the positions in the pluralism debate in a way that captures all of the nuances in the multiplicity of views on the subject. Since space does not permit exploration of definitional issues, I will continue to talk about pluralism in Race’s terms.

^{iv} Min usefully distinguishes five categories of pluralism (60); his distinctions are not fundamentally related to the issue of incompatibility.

^v Eddy (“Religious Pluralism and the Divine”) and Seeman (“What if the Elephant Speaks?”) provide excellent discussions of Hick’s adoption of Kantian views and the resulting difficulties he faces.

^{vi} Just as Hick's view inherits the strengths and weaknesses of Kantianism, the plausibility of Harrison's view depends in part on the merits of internal realism, as she recognizes when she responds to Alston's critique of that view ('Problem of Religious Diversity' 298-300).

^{vii} In addition to the doctrinal version of this critique, there is an ethical variant developed by D'Costa ('Impossibility'), Baillie ('New Problems'), and Drew ('Reconsidering'), among others. Hick and Knitter in particular are accused of implausibly asserting that the world religions share an ethical core. The argument of these critics is based on the claim that, even if different religions endorsed the same ethical principles, the "bridge principles" necessary for translating these to specific actions would be different in different religions. This critique is distinct from the particularity objection, for it does not have to do with the quandary of adhering to one faith when one believes them all. It does not threaten to undermine one's commitment to one's religion, to find that other religions share its ethical code.