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RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

I. Introduction: Tolerance, Relativism, and Pluralism

For many people, the diversity of religious practices and beliefs is a fact of everyday life. When I was an undergraduate, I shared an apartment, at various times, with two Muslims and a Buddhist, among others. In addition, I have had and continue to have friendships with many more people of various religious faiths (as well as those of no faith at all). And such experience is certainly not unusual.

While we have become increasingly exposed to the diversity of religious beliefs that surround us, our culture has at the same time begun to place less emphasis on these very differences. A number of factors have led us in this direction: dismay and regret over religious persecution and cultural imperialism, to name two. But, however exactly we got here, "relativist" and "pluralist" views about religion are all the rage these days, in the academy as well as on the street. Usually, those who hold such "pluralist" views have not thought them through very carefully. Defenders of pluralism will often describe their views with slogans, such as "all religions are true," or "there are many roads to God." (Many appeal to the well-worn Hindu parable of the blind men who touch different parts of the elephant, each mistaking a different part for the whole.) Put in these simplistic terms, it's easy to show that these views are just indefensible. In fact, I'll

show later on that there are powerful reasons to reject even the most sophisticated versions of pluralism.

But this offensive strategy is not my main aim here. The reason it is not is this: people today are far less committed to pluralism than they are to the belief that traditional, "absolutist," or "exclusivist" understandings of religious claims are arrogant or irrational or in some other sense unacceptable. According to this way of thinking, it's fine, e.g., to believe that Jesus Christ is a way to God, but improper to hold that he is the way to God. More radically, it's okay to believe that one has experienced the love of God the Heavenly Father, as long as one doesn't conclude from this that ultimate reality is, "absolutely speaking," a personal being. (For this would imply, e.g., that the Zen Buddhist view of nirvana, the pure "suchness" or ego-less being of ever-changing reality, is false.) One should instead say something more qualified, such as "in my experience, ultimate reality has taken on the appearance of a transcendent, personal being." We are thus admonished not to throw out our Christian beliefs altogether, but to hold them in a way that doesn't "delegitimize" the truths of other religions. Thus, current fashion would urge us to hold our religious beliefs in a way quite different from the way we hold our beliefs about, for example, the physical world. We all think that it is simply true that there are birds and buildings and baseballs. Anyone so mentally impaired as to deny these

things is simply wrong. With respect to birds, we might say, we're all exclusivists.

For many people, then, there is a general "air of plausibility" to pluralism in matters of religion, though they don't have any worked-out view on the matter. So, if we were to proceed by arguing against one particular version of pluralism, many would likely think that, while that version fails, there is likely some other view that would successfully and coherently describe what they believe. A more promising tack that some contemporary Christian philosophers have taken, and that I will take here, is to root out the fundamental assumptions that lie behind appeals to pluralist doctrines. When this is done, we will see that the reasonableness of the pluralist view vanishes.

I will proceed in two stages. First, in section II, I will show that the main pluralist argument against exclusivist Christian belief fail. Second, in section III, I will show that the main arguments in favor of the most promising version of pluralism also fails. With that, the critique of pluralism will be complete.

II. Pluralist Objections to "Exclusivist" Christian Belief

Pluralists reject traditional Christianity (where this involves holding beliefs exclusively) in a number of ways. I will take up the three most common of these objections.

A. The "No Difference in Spiritual Fruits" Objection

Unlike many atheists or naturalists, pluralists are not skeptical about religious experience (at least much of it). They're generally happy to admit that a person's religious experiences make it reasonable for him to have the beliefs he does concerning the Ultimate. Let's take me for an example. I have had experiences in which it has seemed to me that my Heavenly Father was in some manner enveloping me, communicating

his love for me, and calling me to draw near to him. These are experiences of a kind typical in the Christian tradition, and they have prompted renewal of my commitments to seek deeper and more regular communion with God and to follow the example of Christ in my life. Accordingly, they give me at least some reason to believe that "the Ultimate" is manifested in the Christian tradition as the all-powerful, all-knowing, and loving Creator of all. If *everyone's* experiences were compatible with mine in the sense that they, too, depicted ultimate reality as having the character ascribed to God in the Christian Scriptures, then the reasonable conclusion would be that *that is what ultimate reality is like in itself*.

But, the pluralist points out, there is no such uniformity among religious experiences. And they cannot all truthfully represent ultimate reality in itself, for they ascribe incompatible attributes to it. (It makes no sense to say that ultimate reality, in itself, is both personal and impersonal.) If I conclude instead that my experiences are veridical – God really was present to me, communicating his love, and so forth – while the experiences of Hindus, for example, indicating that ultimate reality is "the blissful universal consciousness of Brahman," are illusory, then I am being arbitrary. For there is no objective basis for deciding between these two. In particular, all religions appear to be roughly equal with respect to what the pluralist holds is the common goal of religion: moving from self-centeredness to "Ultimate-Reality-centeredness." This movement is the "spiritual fruit" that comes from sincerely practicing one's faith. We don't all get as far as we'd like, of course. In all traditions, there are few "saints," others in whom there is no discernible change, and a great many more in between. As the pluralist philosopher John Hick has put it, we must, then, "avoid the implausibly arbitrary dogma that religious experience is all delusory with the single exception of the particular form enjoyed by the one who is speaking."¹ The only position, Hick argues, that is

both not arbitrary and not completely dismissive of the authenticity of religious experience is the pluralist's.

Recall that, according to the pluralist, many kinds of religious experiences involve legitimate contact with "Ultimate Reality." How then can the pluralist make sense of the contradictory religious beliefs these experiences give rise to (that Ultimate reality is, for example, personal and nonpersonal)? The answer is that pluralists hold that Ultimate Reality as it really is is beyond our intellectual grasp – indeed, it utterly transcends the categories we apply to it. When we experience it, we conceptualize it in terms of categories that we have available to us (since human beings need to categorize their contact with the Ultimate to make sense of it and respond to it). Numerous categories have been devised for this purpose across cultures, but no particular packaging is necessary. Some forms may be more efficient than others, but there are evidently many forms that get the job done reasonably well.

It may be thought that some religious traditions are in greater agreement with the pluralist regarding the unimportance of creed than Christianity is. When I was a graduate student at Cornell University, the Dalai Lama came and delivered a lecture entitled "Overcoming Our Differences." In the lecture, he stressed themes for which he has become well-known in the U.S. – respect for cultural and religious differences and the centrality of practicing compassion, whatever one's creed. He was quoted in an interview as believing that Buddhism is not the best religion for everyone, and that sincere Christians who find that their faith leads them to act compassionately should by all means continue in it. Is that form of Buddhist teaching, at least, in agreement with Hick on the inessentiality of doctrine? In fact, it is not. According to this Tibetan tradition, it is essential to ultimate salvation or liberation that one realizes the truth of the doctrine of emptiness (*sunyata*). Roughly, on this view, our way of understanding the

world around us is radically illusory. There are no individual objects such as birds and buildings and baseballs (and people!). Reality is a "void," empty of all substance. This recognition is thought to free one from attachment to things and ultimately to lead to liberation from the cycle of rebirth. But such Buddhists recognize that not everyone is ready to understand this teaching. And as this ultimately necessary insight is inextricably bound up with practices (including works of compassion) that reflect the cognitive understanding of the doctrine of emptiness, and as good rebirths (which put one in better position to attain it) can be achieved by engaging in them, it may well be best, on the Buddhist scheme of things, for a given individual to set such doctrinal matters aside for a time (or a life or two) in order to cultivate the equally necessary "skillful means."² Thus, this form of Buddhist teaching is compatible with a very relaxed attitude about doctrinal religious differences – but only because of its commitment to specific propositions concerning the nature of reality which conflict with those of various other faiths, such as traditional Christianity, and which conflict with the pluralist's conception as well.

Thus, the pluralist's position is at odds with most if not all traditional religions, not just "exclusivist" Christianity. But how should we, as Christians, address the pluralist's no-difference-in-spiritual-fruits objection? The most basic point to make is that the pluralist poses a false choice. The traditional Christian who rejects pluralism is *not* thereby forced to the "arbitrary" claim that Christian experiences of God alone are reliable, while experiences of ultimate reality as mediated by other traditions are wholly illusory. The nature of religious experience and the extent to which its content is shaped by religious tradition are complex subjects, which I cannot explore here. But clearly Christians can allow that non-Christians are capable of experiencing God in some manner, though we will, owing to the teachings of the faith, suppose that some of the

very specific claims that are made about God (or the Ultimate) as a result of those experiences are false, stemming from the influence of false religious tenets.³ For it is integral to Christian teaching that God is Lord of all creation and desires that all should come to him (2 Pet. 3:9). Human beings were made to enjoy him; it is only through the effects of sin that we do not naturally experience his presence as vividly and continuously as one experiences the warmth of the sun on a bright summer day. But sin has not entirely eradicated this natural affinity for our Maker, nor has God abandoned those who have yet to come to understand his purposes and offer of redemption through Christ. None of us can say to what extent our supposed experiences of God are the result of self-delusion or of some unreliable source. Christians themselves are taught to look on their religious experiences with some degree of caution and to test whether any content they have (purporting to reveal something about God's nature or his purposes) are consistent with authoritative teaching. For we, too, are prone to all sorts of pride, dishonesty about our true condition, and susceptibility to social influences, and also to blameless forms of powerful unconscious influences. But as we know that God has not abandoned his people and we are explicitly taught to expect some measure of experience of his gracious presence (at times comforting and at times rebuking), we confidently suppose that much of our apparent experience of God is genuine. God really is intending and causing us to have some measure of heightened awareness of his nature and purposes for us, though there is indeed a degree of processing or "filtering" of "divine input" (which the pluralist supposes entirely shapes the experience), and this distorts, to some extent, what God wants us to understand about himself.

B. The Arrogance Objection

A second and quite common objection to exclusivist religious belief is that it involves arrogance

on the part of the believer. If I, as a traditional Christian, suppose that I have come to have true beliefs in such an important matter as religion, where so many other human beings have not, I must think that I am superior to them in some important respect — intellectually or morally. For I have been able to discern the truth in a morally significant matter where so many others have failed.

But, common though this objection is, it is quite unpersuasive. Let us acknowledge at the outset that the Christian Church has not lacked for arrogant people. More particularly, our numbers have included those who have been highly arrogant in just the way the pluralist suggests: people who supposed that Christians have believed rightly where others have not because they are superior intellectually or ethically. This is clearly repugnant. Given the organic unity of the body of Christ, it is one of the many sins we should corporately confess. (Of course, the Church is in no way *special* in this respect: we see this sin in parts of the Church precisely because the Church draws its numbers from the full range of human beings. And humanity does not lack for ample instances of every kind of moral failing, arrogance included.)

But should we think that such arrogance is an inevitable consequence of exclusivist belief? Any one of us can point to exemplary (though still flawed) "exclusivist" Christian brothers and sisters who show no discernible trace of the kind of arrogance highlighted by the pluralist. It is, after all, a basic feature of Christian teaching that faith is a gift of God and that God is specially inclined to call on the poor and those who are "foolish in the eyes of the world." Granted, even this teaching can be (and in some cases, has been) embraced with a perverse kind of pride in one's lowly social or intellectual status. But this need not occur, and often enough it does not.

Furthermore, as Peter van Inwagen has remarked, the pluralist who presses this kind of objection to traditional Christian belief is likely

to “find himself surrounded by a lot of broken domestic glass.”⁴ Why? Because the central idea behind the arrogance objection is one the pluralist is obliged to apply to nonreligious beliefs as well. Perhaps the following best captures this central idea:

For any belief of yours, once you become aware (a) that others disagree with it and (b) that you have no argument on its behalf that is likely to convince all or most of the reasonable, good-intentioned people who disagree with you, then it would be arrogant of you to continue holding that belief.

Now let’s think about this principle in light of the pluralist’s own views. He embraces this principle while surely being aware that many others think it is false. (I myself disbelieve the principle, but as it would be immodest to point to myself as convincing proof, I’ll point instead to the astute and eminently fair-minded editor of this book.) But then, to be consistent, the pluralist should abandon this very principle. Believing the principle in the face of informed disagreement, as the pluralist does, violates the principle. The moral here is that pluralism is no way of escape from the charge of arrogance.

Some quick-thinking pluralist might retreat at this point and conclude that having any kind of view at all (including pluralism) in a climate of disagreement is what is arrogant. But why think that? Isn’t it more sensible to suppose that the pluralist has gone overboard? He notes that some exclusivists have held their beliefs in an arrogant fashion, and wrongly concludes that arrogance is an inevitable result of exclusivist belief in the face of disagreement. In any case, the fact that one cannot, as we’ve just seen, defend this claim without falling prey to one’s own principle should lead us to reject this pluralist argument.

C. The Irrationality Objection: “Where Reasonable People Differ, the Wise Man Withholds Judgment”

This brings us to a third and most fundamental objection to exclusivism, which, at a first pass, is that since there is no objective basis of any sort (experiential or otherwise) for reasonably selecting among religions, preferring some one of them (such as Christianity) above all the rest is irrational. Put this way, however, this argument deserves little sympathy. Following a long line of philosopher-theologians, I myself, for example, hold that a theistic worldview is rationally preferable to any of its rivals, such as philosophical naturalism. I further believe we may reasonably accept the Christian revelation and reasonably prefer it to the going alternatives.

Not surprisingly, most pluralists disagree. But they do not try to engage the thoughtful Christian by pressing the specific grounds for disagreeing on this score – that is, engage in the usual back-and-forth philosophical/theological dialogue with the goal of persuading others of one’s own way of understanding things. Instead, they contend that the very fact that relevantly informed, reasonable people of good will disagree with the thoughtful Christian provides a compelling basis for withdrawing his acceptance of Christianity as uniquely true.

What should the Christian think of this objection? Here the pluralist is perhaps arguing for a “principle of rational belief” which is akin to the principle described in the arrogance objection earlier. Possibly, something like this:

For any belief of yours, once you become aware both that others disagree with it and that you have no argument on its behalf that is likely to convince all or most of those dissenters that are relevantly informed, reasonable, and of good will, it would be irrational of you to continue holding that belief.

But is this really so? One might try to draw an

analogy here to science, where, we are often told, people refrain from belief until the facts come in so as to produce virtual unanimity. But this popular portrayal of the history of scientific practice and belief is a myth. There are numerous instances of scientists vigorously contending for a given theory in the face of highly distinguished opposition. This may take the form of large opposing factions or of even only one scientist defending a position against the rest of the relevant scientific community, a view which in some cases ultimately prevails. Must we say that in all such cases, knowledgeable people who carefully considered the evidence, weighed arguments for competing positions, and came to a particular view were irrational to do so?

Consider the following very recent example. In the 1980s, two researchers named Marshall and Warren uncovered strong evidence that a bacterium known as *H. pylori* is responsible (in most cases) for making the stomach and intestinal lining vulnerable to the formation of peptic ulcers. When they produced this evidence, the scientific community scoffed at it, in part because it contradicted firm opinion that no bacteria could survive in the half gallon of acid produced by a human stomach. (Marshall went so far as to consume a large quantity of *H. pylori*. After developing acute ulcers, he then treated himself with an antibiotic that permanently eradicated the problem.) Evidence for the bacterium theory mounted for several years before it was generally accepted. To this day, many who suffer from ulcers are not tested for *H. pylori* or given the necessary antibiotic.

I take it that this case strongly suggests that the principle of rational belief proposed above is implausible. However, a more reasonable pluralist might argue that the principle does not apply to beliefs of all sorts, but only to religious beliefs (and maybe a few other types of belief) since with these beliefs there is never a convergence of opinion, at least among "experts." This makes religious belief quite different from scientific belief where contested ideas come either to be

accepted or rejected, owing to the uncovering of new evidence.

Yet even though there is such a difference between scientific and religious disputes, why exactly should we suppose that it is a *relevant* difference? No doubt, the fact that scientific theories are open to confirmation and disconfirmation in a way that usually leads to consensus, in the end, is a good thing. But why should we think that the fact that scientific theories can be confirmed and disconfirmed in this way makes rational disagreement, in the *absence* of conclusive evidence, acceptable in the scientific case, but not in the religious one?

Some have thought that the absence of decisive empirical testability of religious beliefs shows that they are "meaninglessness." But, again, why should anyone think this? While I haven't the space to explore this matter here, I'll say that I myself don't find the prospects for defending this pluralist principle at all promising. In any case, the reader will note that the argument beginning in the next paragraph applies equally to this restricted version of the irrationality argument.

I have argued that the "principle of rational belief" that seems to lie behind pluralist criticisms of traditional Christian belief is not at all clearly true. But matters get worse for the pluralist critic. One thing all pluralists believe is the thesis of pluralism itself. And this thesis is not something that has been widely agreed upon, even among those who have considered the question. (It has far fewer adherents, for example, than traditional Christianity.) Are not pluralists themselves, then, guilty again of violating their own principle, since they persist in their pluralist beliefs in the face of such honest dissent?⁵

As a final *coup de grace*, it may be noted that this alleged principle of rational belief is prone to turn on *anyone* who endorses it. The principle, you will recall, is this:

For any belief of yours, once you become

aware both that others disagree with it and that you have no argument on its behalf that is likely to convince all or most of those dissenters that are relevantly informed, reasonable, and of good will, it would be *irrational* of you to continue holding that belief.

Now, as with the "arrogance principle" discussed earlier, I know many reasonable people who deny this rationality principle. (I'll again tip my hat towards the distinguished, acutely intelligent editor of this book.) So it seems that anyone who endorses this principle in present intellectual circumstances has good reason to reject it: since reasonable and good-intentioned people disagree about the principle, the principle itself says that the honorable thing to do is not to believe it. It may for all that be true, but given the fact that we don't all accept it, none of us who are apprised of that fact can consistently believe it to be true. And if we cannot consistently believe it, we have quite a good reason not to believe it.⁶

The general moral to be drawn here is that we can't avoid making judgments as best we can even where others disagree. Pluralists themselves invariably make highly contentious assumptions about morality and rationality. They can do so, however, only by exempting themselves from their own arbitrary standard.

Clearly, the way to make progress here is not, as the pluralist holds, to pat the exclusivists on the head and declare all the beliefs of the disagreeing parties equally "correct" (though not correct in the way the disagreeing parties think they are).

III. Against Pluralism

It is worth noting that my remarks in the previous section, if successful, do not show that pluralism is false; rather, they only serve to undercut the arguments that pluralists make against exclusivists. But we may go further, I believe, and provide positive reasons for thinking that the pluralists' own alternative view is defective. To

do so, however, we need to have a concrete version of pluralism before us.

A. A Pluralist Picture of Things

Here's one way of telling the pluralist story.⁷ Religious beliefs that have formed within major religious traditions such as Christianity are culturally conditioned responses to Ultimate Reality ("the Ultimate"). In itself, the Ultimate is beyond all the categories religious believers apply to it. Many devout persons of every established faith experience the Ultimate, but never as it *really* is (something which is unknowable), but only through one or other of its many manifestations, all of which are conditioned by religious tradition. This is an inevitable consequence of the gulf between this Ultimate Reality and our finite minds. When we come in contact with this Ultimate Reality, our minds actively (though unconsciously) process it in a way that makes it understandable to us. The result is an experience of the Ultimate by Christians as the Heavenly Father, and by Zen Buddhists as nirvana.

It is important to remember here, as I have hinted at earlier, that the pluralist does not think that the diversity of claims made about the Ultimate shows that those claims are false. This is the point of saying these diverse claims correspond to "authentic manifestations of the Ultimate." Sometimes manifestations are manifestations of deities (Yahweh, Allah, and Krishna) and sometimes of nonpersonal absolutes (the advaitic Hindu Brahman and the Buddhist nirvana). Rather than regarding these different ways of understanding the Ultimate as false, they are viewed as ways in which the Ultimate becomes an actual object of religious worship and pursuit. For we cannot worship the Ultimate "as it really is," since we are intellectually incapable of grasping it in this way. None of the distinctions which structure our religious experience can apply to it, not even as an approximation or by analogy. "As it really is," the Ultimate is neither personal nor impersonal, one nor many, good nor evil.

But though there are many and widely diverse authentic manifestations of the Ultimate, the pluralist is not bound to admit that "anything goes." It would be an embarrassment to the pluralist if, for example, he had to say that the theology of the Branch Davidians or the Aum Shin Rikyo cult is an equally authentic manifestation of the Ultimate. No, only some religious conceptions rightly relate us to the Ultimate. Which ones? Pluralists typically hold that a conception of the Ultimate is "authentic" if it moves adherents from being self-centered to being Reality-centered or to affirming the goodness of ultimate reality.⁸

B. Pluralism as an Explanatory Hypothesis

Pluralists commonly hold that their view is the simplest hypothesis that accounts for the diverse forms of religious experience and thought.⁹ Thus, we should favor the pluralist hypothesis just as, for example, we favor the simplest available scientific theory capable of providing an account for a wide range of data in a certain domain. However, the supposed explanatory power of pluralism is only superficial. There certainly is a marked simplicity to the pluralist's scheme, but its shortcomings offset this particular virtue by a mile.

Consider, for starters, the relationship that the pluralist supposes exists between the Ultimate "as it really is" and individual human beings. There are at least two very odd features of this relationship, features which undercut the claim that the pluralist hypothesis is the best explanation for the diversity of human religious experience. First, all the content of religious experience, on this view, is provided by the human experienter. The only contribution the Ultimate makes to the experience is as some sort of "ultimate source" or "ground" of that experience. But even this way of putting it may suggest too much. For it suggests that the Ultimate causes us to have the experience we do. But the pluralist cannot say even this, since putting it this way favors religious

views (such as theism) that conceive of the Ultimate as an entity distinct from the physical universe. On other views, the Ultimate is simply the physical universe itself, understood in some special way, and the "relation" between human and the Ultimate involves merely an insight that the Ultimate and the universe are one and the same in this special way.

Once we see, however, that the pluralist cannot make the very minimal claim that the Ultimate acts as cause of my experience, then the claim that the pluralist hypothesis is even potentially explanatory is questionable at best – let alone the claim that the pluralist hypothesis provides the best explanation.

Finally, because the pluralist holds that we can know nothing at all about the nature of the Ultimate "as it really is," the existence of this Ultimate can't do any more explanatory work than it does when we say that it is the "ground" of the different forms of religious experience and thought. If we cannot say even that it is active or purposive or even one or many, then we can hardly appeal to it to help us explain, for example, the existence of or order in the universe. So if the only support for the pluralist picture of the Ultimate – its potential to explain the fact of religious diversity – is itself quite weak, as I have argued, then the overall judgment we should make concerning this hypothesis is that it is not a good explanatory hypothesis at all.

C. The Incoherence of the Pluralist Picture

So far, I have ignored what, to my mind, is the gravest defect in at least many forms of pluralism, including the one sketched above. And that is that it is demonstrably incoherent. Out of their concern not to "unfairly" favor one religious tradition over another, pluralists usually say not just that we cannot know whether the Ultimate is personal or impersonal, active or passive, purposive or purposeless, one or many, etc., but that it is "beyond" these categories altogether. And this is a hard saying indeed. For while certain

intellectual quarters encourage people to say such things, the claim is simply unintelligible. Perhaps the best way to make this plain is to proceed in two stages. First, I will give a simple argument for the claim that this sort of pluralist position is unintelligible. I will then note that this initial critique is too simple. This will show us that there is one (and only one) basic way of avoiding my critique. The second stage is to note that this way out is not one taken by the pluralist.

Here is the first (overly simple) argument against the intelligibility of pluralism:

Anyone who asserts the "beyond human categories" kind of pluralism is either in a muddle or has lost the sense of the word "not." For consider the two claims, "The Ultimate is personal" and "The Ultimate is not personal." These are not merely contraries, as logicians say, such that at most one of them can be true, though it might be that neither is true. (As is the case with the claims, "Tim O'Connor is the greatest living philosopher" and "Michael Murray is the greatest living philosopher." At most one of these is true, but it's also just possible that neither is.) They are logical contradictories – it must be that one of them is true and the other is false. If it is false that the Ultimate is personal, then it is true that the Ultimate is not personal. And vice versa. The pluralist wants to assert, however, that it is not true that "the Ultimate is personal" and it is not true that "the Ultimate is not personal." This is simply contradictory (inconsistent), and it is not intelligible that a contradiction be true.

The reason this argument is too simple is that it overlooks a pervasive feature of most of our concepts, which is that they are *vague*. One familiar example of this is our color concepts. Imagine a large array of adjacent color samples, such that the one on the left is clearly red, and the one on the right is clearly orange, and the shades in between constitute a slow transition from red to

orange such that any adjacent two are barely perceptibly different in color. At what point do the red patches end and the orange patches begin? Clearly, if the differences between adjacent shades are subtle enough, there will be no definite answer to this question. There will be a border region such that it will not be (fully or definitely) true that a particular patch in the region is red, nor will it be (fully or definitely) false that it is red, either. Our concept of redness is simply not sharp enough to decide the matter one way or the other.

Now one could claim that personhood, like redness, is a vague concept, admitting borderline cases. And if this were correct, it does not clearly follow from its being not (definitely) true that the Ultimate is personal that it must be (definitely) false that it is personal – that it must be impersonal. And in this way, one might try to escape between the horns of the dilemma.

But the pluralist does not try to escape the simple critique in this way, for doing so would require that the pluralist make some very substantive claims about the nature of the Ultimate, staking out a position that directly competes with each of the major religious outlooks. And this is the very thing the pluralist wants to avoid. No, the typical pluralist's position is more radical than that, and this means that it is also incoherent. There simply is nothing for "being beyond personhood" to mean, if it is neither being utterly impersonal or being somewhere in between personhood and non-personhood. And inconsistency provides as strong a case against a view (in this instance, against pluralism) as one can make.

Maybe, however, there is a middle-of-the-road position available to the pluralist here. The pluralist might say that for any property we wish to ascribe to the Ultimate, it either has that property, or it lacks it, or it is somewhere in between having and lacking it (as some of the colors on the continuum I mentioned earlier might be between "being red" and "being not-red"). Since being one or many, being active or entirely

passive, and being identical to or distinct from the physical world are pretty clearly sharp, not vague, divisions, we might feel pushed in one direction or another on properties such as these. (We might say, for example, that the Ultimate is a single, active being distinct from the universe.) But perhaps we're less sure about other attributes, such as personhood. Given disagreement across religious traditions, we could split the difference here. But now however exactly we come down on individual attributes using this procedure, aren't we just being arbitrary? Aren't we simply making our own judgments in at least some cases – thereby *contradicting* some religious tradition or other – and then splitting the difference in others, out of deference to the diversity of opinion, including the ones one has contradicted with respect to other claims? Of all the ways one might come to a developed opinion in religious matters, this seems the most arbitrary.

IV. Conclusion

Every age has its unreflectively held assumptions. For the present generation, a vaguely articulated notion of pluralism in relation to religion and morality is one of those assumptions. I hope to have shown that it has a lot less to be said on its behalf than many people suppose. I haven't considered every possible variation on the pluralist theme, but my arguments can, I believe, be generalized.

One less obvious form pluralism takes in our culture is a certain kind of agnosticism (which on its face seems rather different from pluralism). The usual variety is instanced by those who have considered evidence on behalf of various religious beliefs and judge the evidence to be inconclusive. Such people ought to be open to standard apologetical argument. But nowadays, many who profess agnosticism about God or religious claims have not spent a lot of time considering the pros and cons. Instead, they're content to gesture at the widespread disagreement and throw up their hands. ("Who can say?") Five

will get you ten that underlying the view of such a person is the thought that one cannot reasonably have a definite opinion on such matters precisely because there is widespread disagreement. (That's why it's unnecessary to actually look at any arguments in detail.) And this position is unstable in just the way that holding our "principle of reasonable belief" above was seen to be unstable. For it is itself a controversial claim, and so (given what it claims) cannot be consistently held.

In the present climate of opinion, the first task for the contemporary Christian apologist in making the case for Christianity is precisely to convince those he engages of the untenability of this pluralist attitude.

Notes

- 1 John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 235.
- 2 My discussion throughout this paragraph is indebted to Jane Compson's recent article, "The Dalai Lama and the World Religions: A False Friend?" *Religious Studies* 32 (1996): 271–79.
- 3 In defending this contention, we ought not implausibly to assert as some occasionally do that Christian experiences of God are "self-authenticating" (have a distinguishing mark that guarantees that they're the genuine article) in a manner that other religious experiences are not.
- 4 See the final few paragraphs of his "Non Est Hick," in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, ed. T. Senor (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), also reprinted in *God, Knowledge, and Mystery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).
- 5 This point and the one that follows have been made by Alvin Plantinga, in his essay, "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in *The Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, ed. L. Pojman (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1987), and also reprinted in *The Rationality of Belief*.
- 6 Thought for the enthusiastic thinker: I have noted that there is no straightforward inconsistency in the circumstance that a principle is true even though none of us can consistently (or, therefore, reasonably) believe it. But there would be a special peculiarity to such an unhappy circumstance in its present

application: for how could a true (and if true, importantly true) principle of *rationality* be such that we cannot rationally believe it? In such a case, we would be required to try to form beliefs in accordance with the principle – it is by hypothesis true, after all – but we could not rationally reflect on such practice and form a true belief about the nature of the underlying principle. I take such a bizarre consequence to constitute a “transcendental refutation” of the principle. Away with such intellectual deviltry! Exercise for the enthusiastic and diligent thinker: construct a rebuttal (similar to the one given in the text of the irrationality objection) of another pluralist claim – viz., that the fact that religious views are strongly correlated with birthplace and family religion should lead one to doubt their (literal) truth. (“You believe Christianity only because you were raised in a Christian culture and/or home. If you had been born in Saudi Arabia, you would have

been a Muslim. Therefore . . .”) [A good answer may be found in Alvin Plantinga’s “A Defense of Religious Exclusivism.” For Hick’s reply to this and Plantinga’s rejoinder, see their contributions to the symposium on pluralism in the July 1997 issue of *Faith and Philosophy*.]

- 7 The story I tell (and some of the arguments against any contrasting, “absolutist” religious view, such as that of traditional Christianity) have been developed with greatest care by Professor John Hick, in such works as *An Interpretation of Religion; Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); “Religious Pluralism,” in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. P. Quinn and C. Taliaferro (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997); and “The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism,” *Faith and Philosophy* (July 1997).
- 8 See Hick, *Disputed Questions*, 178, 174.
- 9 See, e.g., Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 248.