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ORIENTATIONAL PLURALISM IN RELIGION

S. Mark Heim

Nicholas Rescher has advanced an account of philosophy which he calls orientational pluralism. It addresses the tension in philosophy between commitment to rational argument and the enduring lack of resolution of major issues. This article suggests that Rescher's view can be fruitfully transposed into a discussion of religious pluralism, illuminating the *status* of theories about religious diversity and providing grounds both for recognizing the legitimacy of diverse religious convictions and making a consistent argument in favor of one's own.

The theological argument over exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism as approaches to religious diversity is crosscut by two different ways of conceiving the problem.¹ In the first, religious commitment is largely understood as the assertion of propositions. The power of this approach rests in the fact that all faiths can be taken to entail propositional presuppositions. Thus Paul Griffiths in his *An Apology for Apologetics* can make a very compelling case for the inevitable clash of categories which attends religious pluralism.² Implicitly and explicitly, he maintains, religious faith itself appeals to some standard of rationality. Even though emphasis might be put on a practice, like repeating the confession "There is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet," and a positive subjective attitude attained in this practice, it is still the case that both practice and attitude presuppose the truth of certain propositions about God and the prophet. Griffiths' argument is considerably strengthened by the recognition that this propositional dimension does not exhaust the content of religion. Apologetic engagement is required only in certain circumstances. Interreligious encounter may involve propositional conflict and agreement but is hardly limited to them. At times they will be decidedly secondary considerations.

By contrast, a second approach stresses constitutive, non-propositional elements: ritual, community, affect, meaning. As the first perspective would point out that these all in fact imply propositions, so this view emphasizes that propositions depend upon contexts. They not only meet or fail rational tests, but express values, serve functions. W.C. Smith for instance makes his well-known case for human "faith"—an existential attitude—as the universal substance of religion.³ Here the evaluative, dispositional aspects of religion come uppermost. Such faith always

takes a particular historical form and that form involves propositions. But these propositions should be understood as variant expressions of a single faith rather than as constituent components of differing faiths. "One's faith is given by God, one's beliefs by one's century."⁴

In the two examples I have given, Smith argues for a common core of religion and Griffiths for a certain incommensurability between faiths. But either *type* of approach, non-propositional or propositional, can be used to argue for either identity or conflict. Some share Griffiths' propositional focus but argue for a universal shared cognitive content of the great traditions, perhaps in a common set of ethical prescriptions. A strong cultural-linguistic approach like George Lindbeck's would incline to agree with Smith that faith cannot be identified with propositions, but would argue that the religions remain distinct forms of life.⁵

Most theological treatments of religious pluralism approach the issue primarily along one of these paths and do their best to take secondary account of the other. Reasonableness and truth are the deep concerns of one; commitment and meaning the deep concerns of the other. The fundamental quandry is how one might recognize the various religious traditions as offering effective ways of life (leading to moral and personal transformation, states of religious fulfillment) and at the same time affirm real cognitive value in the distinctive tenets of the religions (even though these may contradict each other in substance). John Hick has offered the most thorough pluralist response to this quandry, arguing that the various religions are soteriologically effective because they are culturally diverse ways of expressing the identical cognitive truth that there is an ultimate reality in adjustment to which humans may be transformed toward a limitlessly better possibility.⁶ In response to this rather thin and abstract truth, both Joseph Runzo and Robert McKim have sought solutions which would allow more significant cognitive value to the differing convictions of the faiths. McKim argues that God may have more than one nature.⁷ Runzo argues for "religious relativism," the notion that a number of varying religious world views may be equally correct versions of the "the way the world is," and thus truly describe different phenomenal divine realities.⁸ McKim and Runzo deny that differing cognitive religious beliefs must be relegated to the status of symbolic representations of one more general truth. They can rightly be held in opposition to each other, without falling back into a pure subjectivism.

My argument is that a fuller integration of the propositionalist and non-propositionalist approaches—showing the sphere and necessity of each element—may further clarify approaches like those of McKim and Runzo. It can do so by clarifying the *status* of theories of religious diversity. Such theories stand among and not above religious perspectives: most particularly they stand among religious perspectives on the religions. The question is what kind of theories can most consistently and coherently acknowledge this about themselves.

I

New light on this problem comes from some recent work in philosophy. In Nicholas Rescher's book *The Strife of Systems*, he outlines a view

which he calls "orientational pluralism."⁹ Although Rescher is explicitly concerned with recent philosophical debates about objectivity and relativism, his arguments intersect powerfully with the issues of religious pluralism. He specifies a way of philosophically respecting "non-philosophical" factors in our search for truth. He addresses the dilemma philosophy faces in reconciling its foundational commitment to the efficacy and relevance of rational argument with the apparent permanence of pluralism on all substantive philosophical questions.

He recognizes that in contemporary philosophy there is a tension between those who maintain the classic view that the discipline's *raison d'être* is the search for truth through rational analysis and those who hold that philosophy's true role is much more limited. This true role may be seen by some as purely technical, the clarification of progress from premise to conclusion. The philosopher is a kind of logical plumber who may be called in to clear the pipes in any kind of argument, with professional indifference to the premises and conclusions in question. Others may see the philosopher's true role as a therapeutic one, fostering a constant category-loosening play of conversation which exorcises the misleading myth of truth itself. This tension between a "classical" approach to philosophy and its more contextual alternatives stands as an analogy to the propositional and more contextualist approaches to religious diversity outlined above. Indeed, in one sense it represents the clash today between modern and postmodern sensibilities.

Since Descartes, skeptics have echoed his lament that philosophy has been "cultivated by the very best minds which have ever existed over several centuries and that, nevertheless, not one of its problems is not subject to disagreement, and consequently is uncertain."¹⁰ Contemporary philosophers, steeped in the sociology of knowledge, are hesitant to expect any end to the situation Descartes described. Philosophy faces its own problem of pluralism: there appears to be not one rational truth but many. And this casts in question the validity of the entire philosophical project. Rescher's contention, in brief, is that philosophy as a discipline can accommodate itself to this enduring lack of convergence while at the same time retaining belief in a unified reality and commitment to the most vigorous doctrinal debate.

He reviews and rejects three possible responses to the philosophical situation.¹¹ Their similarity to approaches in the discussion of religious pluralism are evident. One response he calls the unique reality view: reality has a determinate character, and only one of the competing descriptions of it can be most rationally adequate. Another he calls the "no-reality" view. There is no ultimate reality or at least none that can be known. Therefore philosophical "truth" problems are pseudo-problems which need to be reconceived, not answered or argued. The task of philosophers is to tease people out of their bondage to this mirage. The third view affirms a multi-faceted reality. Each competing view gives truth, but none gives the whole truth. Reality is the sort of thing that contrasting rational views can be right about. He quotes Nelson Goodman: "There is no one way the world is, but there are ways the world is."¹²

In place of any of these, Rescher advocates what he calls "orientational pluralism." One and only one position is rationally appropriate from a given perspective, but we must recognize that there are a diversity of perspectives. The distinctive thing about his view is the insistence that a practicing philosopher rightly and inevitably maintains both that there is one unique reality with which some understandings most fully correspond and that there is a wider range of understandings which are equally rationally defensible. Argument and inquiry can only operate from a perspective. From a given perspective there is ultimately only one rationally defensible conclusion. We seek to discover what this is and insofar as we believe we do, we may rightly hold that it is more valid than conclusions reached from other perspectives.

It is important to note how Rescher's position differs from the simple affirmation that reality is multi-faceted. That affirmation points toward a possible all-inclusive position by accumulation. The perspectival view by contrast affirms an irreducible plurality. Facets can be combined, while perspectives cannot. Perspectives are one (at a time) to a customer.¹³ We can illustrate the difference through the parable of the blind persons and the elephant which is so overworked in discussions of religious pluralism. The story classically demonstrates the way apparently conflicting conclusions stem from various limited perspectives on the same reality. One person, feeling the trunk, believes it to be a snake. Another feels a leg and believes it is a tree. Yet another touches the elephant's flank and insists it is a wall. The story of course is told from the point of view of the sighted person among the blind.¹⁴ It is laughably obvious that blind persons could dispel their naive dogmas in a few moments, quickly accumulating all of each other's relevant experience of trunk, legs, flank and assimilating them to an identical cumulative picture. Thus might different facets be combined. But the world is not an elephant. A single life can gather only one very small thread of the whole, and can gather it only from a limited number of perspectives.

This "exclusion principle" is personal as well as logical. While it violates the principle of non-contradiction to say that at the same moment I both see and do not see a train, there is no contradiction involved in saying that another person sees it and I do not. And there is no logical problem in saying a train is seen by two people at once—one from inside and one from outside—though it is not possible for the same person to be doing the seeing in both cases. Recognizing a diversity of perspectives allows us to say that contradictory statements can both be true, of different persons with different perspectives. It also allows us to say that two things, which are not logically incompatible, may be mutually exclusive for any individual or community at one time. So the "exclusion" Rescher has in mind deals as much with personal states that cannot both hold at the same time for the same person as with contradictory propositions.

Rescher roots his discussion in consideration of what he calls "aporetic clusters." These are families of contentions each of which has a strong evidential claim but which are mutually incompatible: the underside of an Aristotelian syllogism. As an example Rescher notes three propositions on virtue widely held by the Greeks:

- (1) If virtue does not always produce happiness/pleasure, then it is pointless
- (2) Virtue is not pointless—indeed it is extremely important
- (3) Virtue does not always yield happiness.¹⁵

Philosophy arises precisely because we find ourselves situated in such thickets when we try to make sense of what already makes sense to us. Each statement in the cluster is highly plausible but they cannot all be right. Nor, Rescher says, can we appeal to the evidence to decide the matter: what the cluster of statements express *is* the evidence, as best we can determine.

Something must be sacrificed—something with a strong appeal—if consistency is to be achieved. Different philosophical “doctrines” arise from various ways of resolving the inconsistency. In the case above, one path to consistency is to deny (1) and maintain that virtue is worthwhile entirely in itself even if it does not produce happiness/pleasure. Rescher says this was the the path taken by Epictetus and Stoics. Another option is to drop (2) and maintain virtue *is* pointless, like Plato’s Thrasymachus. A third option is to deny (3) and hold that virtue is inevitably productive of happiness, a path Rescher attributes to Plato. The key point Rescher stresses is that this choice itself cannot be made purely on the basis of evidence and reason. It requires recourse to evaluative judgments or commitments.

Philosophy thus always presents us with overabundant material, an excess of empirically grounded, rationally defensible propositions. We can’t have them all. Without such decisions philosophy can hardly begin. In deciding which to keep and which to let go, we depend upon an evaluation of priorities. Such judgements define the constraints of what *counts* as a solution. Epistemic values have to do with the paradigms we favor, with what we mean or want to mean by “knowledge.”¹⁶ These will be quite different, Rescher suggests, if our model of knowledge is taken from mathematics (Spinoza) or from literature (Derrida). It is these epistemic values which constitute an “orientation,” from which “orientational pluralism” takes its name.

Rescher offers the following aporetic triad to illustrate his own view.¹⁷

- (1) Philosophical problems are legitimate and solvable cognitive issues
- (2) Solution to philosophical problems is only achievable through recourse to cognitive values
- (3) Recourse to values is illegitimate in rational inquiry

Oriental pluralism drops (3). It holds that no philosophical thesis can be justified without adopting an evaluative perspective. To assert a thesis is also to commend adoption of the orientation in which its warrants rest.

Oriental pluralism plainly acknowledges that it is a thesis subject to all the conditions just described. It can be chosen and defended from among alternatives only by evidence combined with evaluative factors.

We could drop (2) rather than (3), if we grant a higher priority to certainty and judge the existence of on-going differences more repugnant. From an orientation committed to the epistemic values of certainty and disciplinary agreement, a thoroughly rational case can be made for this view. Philosophy can be conceived and practiced in this way, in other words, by radically limiting its scope.

Oriental pluralism is not intended as a neutral, methodological description of how philosophy operates. If any such description is taken to have implications for the practice of philosophy, it is already "doctrinal." It is not mere description but judgement. Every account of the nature of philosophy is a position *in* philosophy. Oriental pluralism thus understands itself as an alternative to views like the one described in the last paragraph, on the same categorical level. It is frankly normative and doctrinal. It says that its description of how philosophy operates is true, and that the recognition of a variety of tenable rational views is compatible with "doctrinal" commitment to one of those views—in this case to orientational pluralism—since such a diversity of rational possibilities is what this doctrine expects.

Rescher argues, in effect, that we necessarily assert the validity of our own perspective in the process of exercising it. It is both irrational and dishonest to argue otherwise. We can recognize the existence of differing outlooks, and recognize that conclusions can be reached from these outlooks by means every bit as rational as those used to reach contrasting conclusions within another orientation. Yet at the same time we are entitled to maintain the universal validity of our own views and we may expect others to do no less for their own. The evaluative judgements that significantly constitute epistemological orientations do not preclude such claims: they are what makes them possible. The possibility of anything like objective knowledge depends on the optimal combination of effective reason and appropriate orientational priorities.

The case for orientational pluralism then has two fronts. On the rational side Rescher stresses the consistency with which it can apply its principles to its own case, a consistency lacking in many competitors, including pluralistic theories of religion. One perspective on the nature of philosophy, for instance, maintains that evidential considerations alone will lead to a single rational conclusion. But this view itself is not agreed to be the single rational conclusion of the evidence. To claim that only purely rational arguments should be allowed is to adopt one kind of value orientation. Evidence can clearly show that other value orientations exist. And if we acknowledge that evaluative orientations crucially shape our conclusions and that there is no purely rational way to choose a single orientation over all others, then we contradict our assertion that evidence necessarily leads to only one rational interpretation. As Rescher puts it, "if you share my values then by rational rights you should share my position. If not, you can look elsewhere...indeed you must."¹⁸ The availability of other rationally tenable views is consistent with what orientational pluralism asserts in claiming to be the most adequate account of philosophy.

On a second front, supporters of orientational pluralism make frank

evaluative arguments. Philosophy struggles between a rationally rigorous practice that risks becoming largely irrelevant to primary human questions and an engagement with those great questions frustrated by the failure to find agreed answers. Rescher suggests that his account of the options best allows us to understand and practice philosophy as a rigorous cognitive activity which also bears on large, live human questions.¹⁹ There is no determinative rational argument that philosophy *must* be construed to combine these two functions and in no other way. But if it is to be understood in this way—if rationality and human relevance are both evaluative priorities—then Rescher argues that orientational pluralism is the single best rational account of it. It is the true account of philosophy from this evaluative perspective, the perspective Rescher holds and commends to others.

In summary, orientational pluralism insists there is only one reality and we are trying to know it. It is not committed to regarding other substantive views as equally valid, only as tenable from different perspectives. What is fragmented is not truth but justification or warranted assertability. The justification offered by a philosophy may be orientationally limited in appeal, but the claims themselves can be universal and unrestricted.²⁰ People who rationally hold contradictory views from different orientations are each justified in thinking the other wrong. "We can only pursue *the* truth by cultivating *our* truth."²¹

Philosophical positions are not opinions but judgements. And, as Rescher strikingly puts it, we are not in a position to concede that someone else's basis of judgement is superior to ours. Someone else's expertise or information may well be so. Such data enriches and expands the basis for our evaluation. But to acknowledge others have better values or beliefs *by* which to judge is in effect to adopt their perspective and drop any other.

Why does recognition that diverse rational positions are appropriately held not contradict the conviction that one's own position is more valid than the others? There is a common contemporary reflex which asserts that to privilege one's own conclusions is the same as denying that others are possible or reasonable. This is clearly not so. Suppose a person lives her or his life according to conclusions we accept as perfectly rational, but whose premise—that money is the primary end, for instance—we do not share. If we go on to say that this premise is allowable for them, though we regard it as misguided, we make this judgement on grounds of some kind inextricably bound up with goods we value. If we affirm the appropriateness of their pursuing that end while we pursue another, we presumably regard this judgement as more valid than at least some others, made on other grounds: for instance, the judgement that the money-oriented person must be coerced in some way to conform to my view. We make a rational judgement about how to deal with differences in orientation, and we make it on the basis of our orientation. In this we behave formally no differently than the person who would insist that the financier change her ways. One negates and the other affirms the viability of this differing evaluative orientation, but we both do so by asserting the primacy of our own evaluative orien-

tations This is an embarrassingly unoriginal observation. But it is rather regularly disregarded. We are unable to judge our own grounds of judgement to be anything but preferable to alternatives. This is not a legalistic but a thoroughly practical contradiction: *we* cannot act on two different orientations at once, even if we understand both are defensible. In the end, we are all inclusivists.

If we say we judge others' orientations to have the same value as our own, we are committed to regard the rational conclusions that flow from those orientations as equally valid, including the exclusivist conclusion that others' orientations do not have the same value. Again, this is not a logical debating point. It has a perfectly practical correlative: none of us do in our practice, speech and thought grant the same value to the perfectly rational conclusions that stem from different orientations. If we insist that no privilege attaches to the perspective from which we judge, it seems we must claim that we have made this judgement itself without any reference to grounds that others do not share. W. C. Smith goes to precisely this extremity, insisting that nothing in religion ultimately should be accepted by anyone that cannot be accepted by all others, and for the same reasons.²² He of course must drastically qualify this principle and postpone its realization to the future. In practice, pluralist authors insist that others should, or will, or anonymously already do share their particularistic grounds of judgement. This is the standard practice of the inclusivism they condemn.

Philosophy as Rescher views it is a communal venture, "a competitive yet quasi-cooperative endeavor to build up as good a case as possible for a diversified spectrum of discordant possibilities."²³ From the perspective of orientational pluralism, the diversity of philosophical systems is not a problem but a solution. It serves to challenge people on the one hand to include as much evidence and as many values as possible in their understanding of the world and on the other to honor the fact that people make different commitments and develop in different directions. Discussion and argument among the perspectives is the very lifeblood for each one.

Rescher writes:

From Hegel's day to ours, philosophers of all persuasions have seen the strife of systems as something to be overcome—somehow to be put behind us once and for all. Some, following Hegel himself—that Napoleon of Philosophy—use the approach of conquest and annexation, of seeking to absorb all of philosophy into one great synthesis.²⁴

But in Rescher's view philosophy does not aim at consensus so much as it collectively seeks for those in each orientation to develop the most sophisticated, most responsible, fullest understanding of the truth possible. Differing visions of truth are the primary allies in this process and communication with and about them its primary medium.

II

Rescher has attempted to reconcile the cognitive rigor of philosophy with the integral role of perspectival judgment. If he is on the right

track—I believe he is—what would a similar approach look like in the area of religion? Clearly philosophy and religion are different spheres: the evaluative, perspectival elements that have been so problematic for post-Enlightenment philosophy are unavoidably central in religion. Faith presents an analogous if heightened problem of balance between perspective and universality.

One important point is that Rescher's treatment can appear highly individualistic. It might be objected that in religion one's orientation is much less a choice than in the philosophical debates he discusses. Although the modern experience is one which heightens exactly this dimension in religion—the awareness that there are other options—still I readily acknowledge the weight of the communal aspect of religion. For our purposes however this does not change a great deal. Rescher's analysis is valid even if persons do not start *de novo* religiously. They certainly do not do so in philosophy either, where communal traditions are also crucial. Most of what Rescher says can be applied to religious communities as well as individuals.

His argument illuminates portions of the current debate about the diversity of faiths. Many commentators remark on the ironic exclusiveness of pluralistic theologies in their claims to represent the only defensible understanding of religious pluralism.²⁵ Their representatives generally respond to such observations not by arguing for the objective truth of their account in contrast to the falsity of all others—a response which would more or less confirm the charge. Instead they tend to appeal to certain experiences, conditions or aims which require some such explanation as they provide. These might include the encounter with noble persons of other faiths, the realization of the cultural conditioning of our own values, the need for peaceful human relations. The data that pluralists identify in this way is generally recognized by those who hold other views. There may be no debate about the positive moral qualities of a Gandhi or an Ambedkar. And yet pluralists will argue that there can be no authentic appreciation of these qualities that does not include recognition of the rough equivalence of the faith traditions in which they arose to other traditions.

In other words, pluralists appeal to an evaluative perspective in which these particular elements are assigned a different significance. John Hick, the outstanding exponent of a pluralist theory of religion, expounds his "pluralistic hypothesis" with great philosophical clarity. He also commends it by clear appeal to an evaluative orientation.²⁶ He advocates his hypothesis as the most effective way to secure 1) real cognitive content for religion, 2) substantial parity among the faiths and 3) preservation of some standard to detect destructive religion and so avoidance of relativism. Insofar as one shares these epistemic values, one's argument with Hick can deal entirely with the most rational way of realizing them. I have dealt with such internal critiques elsewhere.²⁷ But I also have a somewhat different evaluative orientation, stressing more concrete cognitive content in the various religions than Hick does, and modifying the understanding of parity among the faiths. Rescher's philosopher says "If you share my perspective, then I maintain you should recognize my con-

clusions as the most reasonable ones." Pluralist theologians tend to respond to critics "If you don't reach my conclusions, it is because you have failed to share my perspective and you ought to do so." This is quite what we would expect in orientational pluralism's terms.

There is a difference here however not to be overlooked. Philosophy is constituted by a certain commitment to rational argument, and philosophers are traditionally those who accept that methodological commitment. The crisis Rescher addresses is a result of the breakdown of this methodological agreement. "Religion," despite its confident listing in our academic syllabai, designates no such discipline and the adherents of faith traditions make no such common methodological commitment. Thus the perspectival diversity that Rescher integrates into philosophy, against its ostensible grain, has a much more dramatic range in religion considered generally than in philosophy. If anything, this should make his conclusions even more applicable for religious life.

Accounts of religious diversity of any stripe—exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist—are at the same time second level descriptions of religions *and* first level religious assertions. Rescher points out that even in philosophy, where it might seem that there could be some consensual, meta-doctrinal account of the discipline as a whole (given the ostensible methodological agreement), this is not the case. Such accounts are inevitably themselves doctrinal in character. This condition is intensified, not diminished in the field of faiths. It is not that we can't attempt and to some extent succeed in empathetically describing various traditions. But the minute one attempts to draw any kind of conclusion from these descriptions one has entered the doctrinal realm.

What do we mean when we say that others are justified to hold views contrasting with ours? I contend that to argue varying views are all equally appropriate to hold, *for reasons equally agreeable to all*, must amount either to a full relativism (the agreed grounds being that no grounds exist) or a radical imperialism (requiring that all subscribe to some particular set of grounds). The first option is only an instance of the second.

Pluralists basically say that the varying views of adherents to different faiths are all salvifically effective, but for reasons the pluralist understands and the adherents themselves—with a few exceptions—currently do not.²⁸ Pluralists intend that on this point their views should displace all others held by believers in any tradition. In this sense, pluralists do not countenance continued diversity. Their account of religious variety provides no internal rationale for the continued existence of accounts of that religious variety alternative to theirs. At this level they see no more reason why they should accept being but one view among many than traditional exclusivist perspectives do.

To use Rescher's idiom, we have the following aporetic cluster:

- (1) More than one type of religious position is valid
- (2) Pluralist theories of religion are religious positions
- (3) Pluralist theories of religion should be accepted to the exclusion of all others

Exclusivists and to some extent inclusivists affirm first order conflict or alternativeness among the faiths. They thus stress the similarity between primary faith and meta-theories of religion, in that both are partly constituted by evaluative orientations. They thus reject (3). Pluralist theologians reject (2), usually not by denying some religious quality to their theories but by arguing that they are not religious in the same sense as (1). They claim a neutral, or generic religiousness which transcends the actual faiths and is not to be classed with them. To make good on this claim pluralists bear, and consistently fail, the test of insulating their meta-theories from grounding in any cultural or religious particularity.²⁹

Rescher's approach by contrast treats his own view of what philosophy does as one of the contending doctrines in philosophy itself. According to his account, we would expect such contention to continue, with each doctrine continuing to make its case over against others. From this perspective, one can see why there are and continue to be different doctrines, while at the same time maintaining the preferable validity of one's own.

In making the argument Rescher does, he acts in consonance with his professed conviction. His argument for his own view against others and his affirmation of the appropriateness of other views than his being held—and claiming superiority to his—are fully consistent. To regard our convictions as “just like anyone else's” is to regard them as the best and most truthful that we know. To regard others' differing faiths as “as good as ours” is to regard them as making more sense than or being preferable to ours, but from a different perspective, one we do not share.

By contrast, pluralist views are caught in a quandary. To be consistent they must maintain that they are not religious views among other religious views. This would provide some rationale for their claims to exclusivism over against alternative views of religious diversity. But it would rule out their simultaneous claim to provide a “religious account of religion,” to be offering a validation of religion in its own terms.³⁰ If they acknowledge the religious character of their view, then they must apply their stated principles on religious diversity to legitimize positions at odds with their own. Very few face this question directly: is a pluralist bound to affirm exclusivisms as independently valid religious ways, with no intrinsic need of pluralist modification?³¹ When a clear answer is forthcoming, it is an inclusivist one: the pluralist insists that other theories of religion are defensible only to the extent that they replicate (“anonymously” perhaps) pluralist views or are consistent with those views. What pluralist theories do not provide is a consistent and plausible ground for making that claim. An orientational pluralist perspective seems a significant improvement on this score since it offers a basis for both universal claims and acceptance of enduring alternatives to those claims, and does not exempt itself from this interpretation as pluralist theories do.

Of course the objection is made: why not see major faiths as *equally* valid, given their different perspectives, and rule out any contention among them? The orientational pluralist responds that it is perfectly

possible to argue for the equal validity of varying faiths, as one doctrine among others. It is not possible to argue plausibly that this is a "non-doctrinal" position. This is the argument between the pluralists and the orientational pluralist over the status of theories of religion. Since both are theories of religion, it is an argument over what kind of argument we are having.

The orientational pluralist maintains that this is a doctrinal argument, which cannot be resolved except by recourse to evaluative perspectives. It is important to note that differences in evaluative orientation need not be and most often are not a matter of diametrically opposed judgements. Two persons who agree in their assessment of the set of relevant and most important evaluative factors may yet diverge decisively in weighing and applying them. Three orientations may all grant tradition and innovation significant claims, but relate them in three different ways. Thus the theoretical account of religious diversity is an area in principle likely to remain a field of rationally appropriate diverse views.

For orientational pluralism the diversity of views about religious diversity is, like religious diversity itself, rationally justified and likely to continue. Pluralists affirm religious diversity, but not the appropriateness of varying views of that diversity. They expect the matter to be settled at the meta-religious level in a way that they would not countenance among the faiths themselves. I maintain that the attitudes which theories of religion take up toward competing theories of religion replicate their true attitudes toward the religions themselves, for each of the religions itself is also an alternative at this level, having one or more of its own theories of religion.

The pluralist perspectives view themselves as more valid than any other accounts of religion. This is an appropriate type of conviction (if concretely incorrect) from an orientational pluralist's perspective. But pluralists appear to refuse to grant any legitimacy to other orientations, from which alternative rational conclusions would be reached. What the pluralist maintains is that if perspectives exist from which it makes sense to have any other conviction, those perspectives must be illegitimate or immoral in some way. Thus pluralism repeats the dynamic of the strong exclusivism it opposes: those who disagree are not rational, not worthy, or both. Orientational pluralism, by contrast, recognizes that conflicting views may be every bit as rational as my own and, though reflecting an evaluative orientation of a different constellation, based in grounds of judgement which I recognize as valid ones, though I order them differently.

Oriental pluralism thus combines a more thorough-going commitment to the warranted justifiability of pluralism in religion with a more positive view toward the actual practice of witness on the part of believers who commend their visions to others. It is highly skeptical of readiness to attribute others' differing religious attitudes to pure irrationality, immorality or bad faith. It also encourages serious attention to the evaluative viewpoints from which neighbors' faiths cohere, since the development of our own truth can only proceed by incorporating more of what we may come to view as valuable in theirs. This is part and parcel of our commitment to the universal import of the truth we believe

we partially grasp (otherwise we could rest content in ours and leave others to theirs) and of our commitment to learn from as well as differ with those who construe the world differently.

The account which Rescher gives of the importance of discussion across philosophical systems has a great deal in common with an insight John Cobb offers out of interreligious dialogue. He believes that there is "one relatively objective norm" that can be inferred from the practice of dialogue—in his case particularly Buddhist-Christian dialogue. He notes four features that he believes characterize at least those traditions that engage in such encounter. They make some claim to the universal value of their affirmations. They teach some measure of humility about our capacity to understand reality in its fullness. They tend to develop some level of mutual appreciation. And the norms by which they judge both themselves and others are enlarged.³² The last is the key point in Cobb's estimation. The "relatively objective" norm which he sees arising from such encounter has to do with a religious tradition's "ability in faithfulness to its past to be enriched and transformed in its interaction with the other traditions."³³

From Cobb's view, there is no reason for religious traditions not to bring convictions of uniqueness and the universal validity of their special beliefs into dialogue or interfaith relations. These do not need to be dropped or bracketed. It is equally of course not the case that each instance or type of interfaith interaction needs to focus on such questions. What dialogue makes possible is for each tradition to develop the fullest and most rigorous and inclusive version possible of its distinctive convictions and life. Cobb assumes that this necessarily involves transformation for all the traditions. In fact, he is not hesitant to make a claim for Christian superiority—the claim that a faith centered on Christ will prove to have an unsurpassed capacity for precisely this kind of dialogue, inclusion and transformation.³⁴ And he would view it as entirely appropriate for those in other traditions to make reciprocal claims.

Such a vision of dialogue seems very much in line with what orientational pluralism would imply in the religious area. This is a vision in which the religions' claims to distinctiveness and their impulse to witness are valued along with sensitive appreciation for different commitments. Somewhat ironically then, orientational pluralism finds a good deal more in order with the faith traditions' actual perspectives on religious pluralism than do contemporary pluralist views that ostensibly commend respect for the religions' views.

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NOTES

1. This typology was developed by Alan Race in *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982) to describe Christian approaches to religious diversity but has been extended to other traditions as well. Exclusivists hold that explicit confession of Christian faith is the only avenue to salvation. Inclusivists maintain that those in various faith tradi-

tions may have access to salvation without explicit Christian confession because of some providential extension of the benefits of God's action in Christ. Pluralists hold that various religious traditions are each independent and sufficient means of salvation.

2. Paul Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991). Griffiths draws significantly on the work of William Christian Sr., *Doctrines of Religious Communities* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987) and *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

3. See W.C. Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979)

4. W.C. Smith, *Belief and History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia: 1977) p. 96.

5. See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

6. John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and the Rationality of Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy*, Volume 10 Number 2 (April, 1993), pp. 242-249. See also John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

7. Robert McKim, "Could God Have More Than One Nature?" *Faith and Philosophy*, Volume 5 Number 4 (October, 1988), pp. 378-398.

8. Joseph Runzo, "God, Commitment, and Other Faiths: Pluralism vs. Relativism," *Faith and Philosophy*, Volume 5 Number 4 (October, 1988), pp. 343-364.

9. Nicholas Rescher, *The Strife of Systems* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1985). I express my appreciation to Owen Thomas, whose unpublished paper introduced me to Rescher's work.

10. Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, F.E. Sutcliffe translator, (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968), p. 32.

11. Rescher, p. 177.

12. Rescher, p. 177.

13. See Rescher's "exclusion principle," p. 188.

14. This point and others are effectively made by Lesslie Newbigin in his discussion of the parable in *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), p. 1.

15. Rescher, p. 25, slightly paraphrased.

16. Rescher, p. 104 ff.

17. Rescher, p. 115.

18. Rescher, pp. 238-39.

19. Rescher, pp. 264-265

20. Rescher, p. 190.

21. Rescher, p. 199.

22. See Smith, *Towards*, pp. 100-102.

23. Rescher, p. 273.

24. Rescher, pp. 276-277.

25. See for instance S. Mark Heim, "Crisscrossing the Rubicon," *Christian Century*, 108, pp. 688-690 for a summary of these views expressed in Gavin D'Costa ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990)

26. See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*.

27. See for instance "The Pluralistic Hypothesis, Realism, and Post-Eschatology," *Religious Studies*, 28 (1992), pp. 207-219.

28. The interesting epigram that Hick places at the head of his *magnum opus* reads "Everything has been said before, but usually by people who did not know that they were saying it." *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 1.

29. These are the criticisms which have forced John Hick, for instance, to shift the grounds for his pluralism from Christ, to God, to an ultimate "Real" resolutely purged of any particular features at all. On the issue of the particularity of pluralistic theories of religion, see S. Mark Heim, "Christianity and the Otherness of World Religions," *First Things*, (August/September) 1992), pp. 29-35.

30. The phrase is Hick's (*Interpretation*, p. 1) but the idea is seconded by others. Hick, W.C. Smith and Paul Knitter, to mention three of the most prominent pluralists, are insistent that their pluralistic interpretations of the religions preserve those traditions' true religious content. That is to say then that Hick's affirmation of an ultimate "Real" which supports human transformation away from self-centeredness or Smith's affirmation of "faith" as a universal existential experience of meaningfulness in human life are intended as religious affirmations.

31. A striking exception is Marjorie Suchocki, who writes "Paradoxically, the one employing the norm that affirms diversity must expect to encounter—and affirm—systems that, containing no valuation of diversity, reject or devalue one's norm and the system it reflects. An absolutist by definition, cannot affirm the pluralist, whereas the pluralist is bound, likewise by definition, to affirm the alternative of absolutism so long as it promotes well-being." "In Search of Justice," in John Hick and Paul Knitter eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), p. 160.

32. John Cobb, "Beyond Pluralism," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, pp. 86-87.

33. Cobb, p. 92.

34. Cobb, p. 92-93.