

CRITICAL PLURALISM:  
A NEW APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

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by  
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CRITICAL PLURALISM:  
A NEW APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

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And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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To Melissa, my wife.

Because of her unending support and selflessness  
I have been able to pursue my interest in philosophy.  
For that I will always be grateful.

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CRITICAL PLURALISM:  
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ABSTRACT

The world's religions provide a wide range of competing religious claims. The problem of religious diversity is that, while many of these claims are inconsistent with one another, they often seem to rest on roughly equal evidence. For this reason, it is not clear which religion, if any, is true. My dissertation examines the various responses to this problem and proposes a unique solution. While some claim that the wide disagreement on religious matters is reason to discard all religious claims as false, I provide an extensive argument in favor of a particularly religious position I call "Critical Pluralism." Critical Pluralism occupies a middle ground between those who claim that all major religions are somehow equally true and those who claim that one religion alone is true. On my view, religious belief systems often provide inadequate yet partially true accounts of a transcendent reality. Many religions *approximate* the truth to some degree. Some even do so a great deal better than others. Nonetheless, there is not a single religion that exclusively captures the truth.

## **PART ONE: LAYING THE FOUNDATION**

### **CHAPTER 1:**

#### *Four Approaches to Religious Diversity*

As a child of nine or ten, I remember first learning about the ancient Egyptians. I received a small book as a gift explaining their various achievements and customs. Of these customs, I was most drawn to their custom of mummification. The process was so intricate and involved, I remember wondering what it was that made them so interested in preserving the dead body. As I found out, the answer is simple. It was because of the afterlife. Because they believed that the dead would wake up in a different world, they made sure to give the dead what they needed. This involved stuffing the tomb with coins and treasures for the dead to use later on. While I marveled at this unique practice, I could not help but think how mistaken they were. Growing up as a member of a modern religion, I thought that the effort put into giving the dead their tools and instruments for the next world was a complete waste of time. The Egyptian notion of an afterlife was too far-fetched to be true.

Then a very simple but profound thought occurred to me. What if it were not the Egyptians who were wrong, but I who had been mistaken? Perhaps all of *my* beliefs about the afterlife, about God and religion, were simply wrong and someone else's religious beliefs were correct. For all I knew, the ancient Egyptians may have been right all along! This simple mental exercise was my first encounter with the problem of religious diversity. Being brought up to have certain religious beliefs, it had never occurred to me that I could be wrong and someone of another faith could be correct. In

fact, until this point I had never thought about the fact that there *were* people of other faiths.

Once one has this thought, however, its consequences are unavoidable. No matter the religion, there are millions of people who have different beliefs. Just as I thought how foolish the ancient Egyptians were, millions of people think that my beliefs are just as foolish. Given this fact, how are we to assess various religious claims to truth? There are a number of possibilities. It may be that one religion is correct and that the others are wrong. It may be that no religion is correct, or it may be that many religions are somehow true. The proper answer to this question will depend on our answers to many other questions such as what we mean by religious truth and what notion of religious reality we are working with. This problem I will call the *theoretical problem of religious diversity*, or simply the *truth problem*.

There is a further difficulty that arises out of the fact of religious diversity. Not only do religions make various truth claims, they often also claim to offer a unique path to salvation. Perhaps the Egyptians thought that only those who were properly mummified and supplied with treasures could pass on to the next world. Other religious people believe that certain beliefs or deeds allow one to achieve salvation. Whatever the case, religions can be characterized as offering a path to an ultimately desirable destination. But, just as with the truth problem, the fact of religious diversity causes one to pause over one's beliefs about salvation. What is necessary for salvation? Does one need to belong to the correct religion? Are certain actions, beliefs, or spiritual states required? This second problem I will call the *soteriological problem of religious diversity*, or simply the *salvation problem*.

In response to both of the problems of religious diversity, there are traditionally three standard positions one can take: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Although later these views will be more clearly defined, at this point I can give preliminary definitions of each. Exclusivism is generally understood as the view that only one religion is correct and that salvation is limited, at least for the most part, to members of that religion. Inclusivism is the view that, while only one religion is correct, salvation is possible for others. Finally, pluralism is the position that most or all religions are somehow correct and thus all can lead to salvation. In this work, I will provide a comprehensive argument for a unique brand of pluralism that I call Critical Pluralism. On my view, no one religion alone is true. Rather, many religions *approximate* the truth to various degrees while some religions approximate the truth significantly better than some others. I do not here attempt to identify which religions are in fact closer to the truth. Rather, my aim is simply to argue for a certain view of how religions are situated in relation to truth.

In order to make my argument clear, however, we must first clearly define exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. The first task necessary to understand the various positions is to clearly identify the conceptual space that each position occupies. For this reason, I will first give an account of religious truth and salvation. Then we will be able to understand what position the exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist take in response to both the truth problem and the salvation problem.

## “True Religions”

What is it for a religion to be “true?” A religion is not a proposition such as “Oranges are a type of fruit” so religions per se are not true or false. Nonetheless, people often speak of the “correct religion” as the one that is true, and other religions as “incorrect” or “false.”<sup>1</sup> So what is it that we mean when we make claims such as this? First, we should specify what a true religion would be true *about*. In other words, what is the domain of religion? This is a notoriously difficult question to answer and there is not the room to discuss it here.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, I think a helpful guideline can be provided here. While scientific theories, for instance, attempt to provide accounts of the natural world, we can say very generally that religions try to give an account of what *transcends* the ordinary natural world and what its relationship is to human life. Peter Byrne, for instance, claims that,

[A]ll religions have a central concern to refer to, and make accessible for human thought, experience and practice, a transcendent reality. This will be a something or other conceived to be that which is most real among all that exists and which provides an anchor for a relationship which can be thought of as constituting the human good.<sup>3</sup>

Even so-called atheistic religions such as some forms of Buddhism speak of *nirvana* as something that transcends the ordinary, is “beyond time,” etc.<sup>4</sup> Thus, we can at least provisionally speak of the religious realm as dealing with that which transcends the ordinary natural world and how the transcendent impacts human life.

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<sup>1</sup> I will hereafter use “correct” and “true” interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion, see Peter B. Clarke and Peter Byrne, *Religion Defined and Explained*, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion* (London: Macmillan Press, 1995), 70. Hereafter, I will refer to this work as “*Prolegomena*.”

<sup>4</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 70.

Second, I would like to note that religions are dynamic cultural phenomena that involve propositional claims, religious practices, as well as moral instructions. While religions are multidimensional, when discussing the truth of a religion, I would like to focus solely on its propositional claims. Doing so avoids making the awkward statement that certain practices or experiences are true while others are false. Focusing on the propositional claims of a religion, however, allows one to speak of practices and experiences insofar as the religion makes propositional claims about them.

One possible understanding of truth in religion is that a religion is true if the claims that it makes are true. Thus, Christianity is true, for instance, if there exists a personal God who became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ and so on. Certainly, exactly what claims Christianity makes is a matter of some debate. The list may be rather short or quite extensive depending on what brand of Christianity is at issue. Nonetheless, on this view, a religion is true if and only if all of its claims are true. Call this the “simple theory” of religious truth.

I doubt that the simple theory is what one has in mind when one uses the term ‘true religion.’ If all of the claims of a religion were true with the exception of one, nonessential claim, it seems that the religion would still be thought to be ‘correct.’ As evidence for this, consider the claim of some Medieval Christians that the sun revolves around the earth. Those Christians believed at the time that geocentrism was entailed by certain biblical passages, and thus necessary to the Christian faith. Nonetheless, it seems that once this belief was discarded, it did not change the ultimate “truth-value” of the religion. Suppose, for instance, that Christianity is the true religion. The fact that geocentrism is no longer a part of Christianity does not mean that Medieval Christians

were members of an incorrect religion and modern Christians are part of the correct religion. It turns out that geocentrism is not essential to the truth of Christianity.

It should be clear that what we mean when we say that a religion is true is not that every claim that it puts forth is true. A second alternative is that every claim *essential* to the religion is true. Another way of putting this is that the “core” claims of a religion are true. Call this the “core theory.” Again, there would be some debate over what exactly constitutes the essential or core claims of a religion. Suppose, however, that it could be done. The claims of religion A could be composed of both the core claims  $C_1 \dots C_n$ , as well as its inessential or periphery claims  $P_1 \dots P_n$ . In order for religion A to be true, then,  $C_1 \dots C_n$  must be true. Whether  $P_1 \dots P_n$  are true is irrelevant to the truth-value of religion A.

Understanding the truth of religions in this way has a certain intuitive appeal. Clearly some claims put forth by a religion are more important than other claims. But this approach fails for a number of reasons. One difficulty is that it seems to ignore many aspects of a religion as “periphery claims.” Thus, some pluralists known as *essentialists* seek a single essence of all religions. Then, using a single claim or group of claims as that which is essential to religion, essentialists claim that all religions are true, in that the core claim or claims is true, while ignoring the bulk of a religion’s important propositional claims. It seems then, that by marginalizing certain claims as peripheral, the essentialist picks merely those claims that work for one’s theory and ignore the rest. While this problem may be predominately a problem with essentialism rather than the core theory of religious truth, a second problem arises for the core theory.

Rather than follow the course of the essentialist, the core theorist could instead pick out only those claims that are essential to a religion as core claims. A claim, C, is essential if and only if, when C is removed from religion R's set of propositional claims, it ceases to be R. In other words, a claim is essential to a religion only when it is an essential property of that religion. For example, belief in God would be an essential claim of Christianity while belief in geocentricism would not. Understanding the truth of religions in this way, however, leaves a wide range of beliefs that are not either clearly core beliefs or clearly not core beliefs. For example, belief in the Incarnation appears to be a core belief of Christianity, but what about belief in the Virgin Birth, the feeding of the five thousand, or the Trinity? Some people may include these beliefs as part of the core while others would not. While this would be a matter of debate, it seems that in this case, *there is no truth of the matter*. Christianity is understood differently in different denominations as well as among different people in the same denomination. While some churches may spell out a list of propositional beliefs, some churches do not. Even among those that do, certain other religious beliefs are not specifically affirmed or denied in their creeds. It seems that arriving at a specific list of core beliefs is not only unattainable, but is a case of barking up the wrong tree. While particular religious people may be able to distinguish between their core and periphery beliefs, each particular religion does not have specific core beliefs that are distinguished from its peripheral beliefs.

One further problem with the core theory is that it stacks the deck against one view of religious diversity, namely pluralism. According to pluralism many or all of the great world religions are true. Since it would be clear that belief in a personal God is a core belief of Christianity, many religions would be incompatible with Christianity.

Perhaps it will be shown in the end that Christianity *is* incompatible with non-Christian religions. For the moment, however, I would like to leave that an open question. If pluralism is already eliminated as a coherent theory simply by one's definition of religious truth, it seems that one has not given the pluralist a fair chance to make her case. For this reason, I would prefer to find an understanding of religious truth that is neutral vis-à-vis theories of religious diversity.

The difficulty involved in searching for the core beliefs of a religion also points to an important fact about religions. In many ways religions are amorphous and fluid. They change over time and vary from place to place. Many beliefs have been attributed to Christianity over the years. Many of these beliefs, such as geocentrism, the role of women, and the interpretation of scripture have changed. Most religions do not put all of their beliefs in propositional form, nor do they distinguish between core beliefs and periphery beliefs. Religions are largely historical phenomena that adapt to change. For these reasons, I think it is a mistake to understand religious truth according to the core theory.

The theory of religious truth I will promote is what I call the "approximation theory." Given the fluidity of religious beliefs in even one denomination over time, I think it is a mistake to classify all religions as either true or false. Rather, it would be more accurate to characterize religions by gradations of truth and falsity. The model for thinking as such can be found in the area of scientific inquiry. It would be a mistake to call a scientific theory as 'true' or 'false' wholesale. While there may be clear cases of true or false scientific theories, most theories are revisable, working hypotheses for understanding scientific phenomena.

Take Darwin's theory of evolution for example. The scientific community's understanding of evolution and natural selection has changed quite a bit since it was first formulated due to the newly available work done in DNA and genetics. While belief in the mutation of genes was clearly not a core belief of the early Darwinists, it seems that it is vital to the theory today. The theory of evolution is understood as a revisable set of hypotheses that can adapt to change and criticism. As a whole it is difficult to say that the theory is either true or false. Rather, it is more cogent to say that as the theory evolves, it approximates the truth more and more, or according to its harshest critics, moves further away from the truth.

Such a model is useful when speaking of religious truth. A religion may be founded by one who has great spiritual insight or by one who is deeply deluded. As such, the early teachings as a whole may be very close to the truth or are very far from the truth. But, throughout time, a religion may discard some of its false claims and adopt other claims that are true. It may be that the opposite takes place. Indeed, many religious schisms involve a break with the purportedly corrupted religion and a harkening back to the original teachings. At any particular time, however, it is mistaken to call a religion "correct" or "true" because the religion makes many different claims, some of which are true and some of which are false. Religions also leave some matters unsettled. Perhaps a religion will arrive at a conclusion after considerable debate or perhaps the religion will not make a judgment on the issue. Ultimately, however, since a religion produces a revisable working theory of religious phenomena, it would be incorrect to label the religion as a whole either true or false. Rather, as I have articulated, it would be more appropriate to think of religions as providing a "mostly true" or "approximately true"

account of religious phenomena just as a scientific theory provides an approximately true account of scientific phenomena. A religion, R, then, can be considered “true” insofar as its propositional claims at least *approximate* the truths of religious phenomena.<sup>5</sup>

Defining religious truth in this way, while avoiding the dichotomy between so-called “true” and “false” religions, inevitably leads to vagueness concerning what one means when one says that a religion is “true.” Some religions may be “more true,” “about as true” or “less true” than others. What exactly the exclusivist or inclusivist means when he says that one religion is true and others are not, or when the pluralist says that many religions are true, will be somewhat vague. As we will see, this vagueness will cause us to revise my preliminary definition of the exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist views. When these issues arise, I will describe how the use of these three terms may still be useful despite their vagueness, just as other vague terms such as bald, tall and red are useful despite their vagueness.

## **Salvation**

Beyond the truth of religions, different views of religious diversity differ regarding their view of salvation as well. In particular, these positions disagree as to which religions are salvifically efficacious. In other words, they differ over whether salvation is only possible through the beliefs and practices of a single religion or whether it is available to those from many, or perhaps all, religions. In order to understand what position the

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<sup>5</sup> For now we can understand “close to the truth” as having mostly true claims and “far from the truth” as having mostly false claims. A more detailed examination of approximate truth is provided in Chapter 3.

exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist take regarding the salvific efficacy of various religions, it is necessary to first give some account of salvation itself.

For the sake of this work, I would like to understand salvation quite broadly. Certainly, the Christian, Buddhist and Muslim will vary greatly on what they mean by the term. In Western traditions, salvation is often thought of as “eternal life,” as participation in a purportedly good afterlife. On this view, one’s religion is salvifically efficacious if it produces the proper beliefs or practices necessary for one to be admitted into such an afterlife. Eastern traditions often make different claims regarding salvation. According to the more mystical practices of Hinduism, one attempts to achieve *moksha*, or release from the cycle of birth and rebirth. In Buddhism, the notion of *nirvana* similarly is a type of release. Here the goal is not to be admitted into a heavenly afterlife, but to be released or liberated from one’s current attachments to the world and reach “the other shore.” In certain Hindu traditions, *moksha* is characterized as bliss and peace. *Nirvana*, on the other hand, is often not spoken of at all. According to the Buddha’s own teachings, it cannot be described or understood.

Given the diversity of these views, John Hick uses the all-encompassing term “salvation/liberation” rather than simply “salvation” to indicate what it is that religions refer to when they speak of either salvation or liberation.<sup>6</sup> Hick sees a common essence among all of the great religions in that salvation/liberation consists of “the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.”<sup>7</sup> For my purposes, we can understand the term salvation to be broader than merely one Christian or Buddhist

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<sup>6</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 36.

<sup>7</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 36. For Hick, ‘Reality-centeredness’ refers to the Real, the religious ultimate of all major religions.

account, but I do not think it is necessary to find a common essence to all of these views. Indeed, at this early stage, I want to define salvation in such a way that exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism are not ruled out automatically. To say that there is a common essence to all of the great religion's accounts of salvation is to stack the deck in favor of the pluralist. Although I will build off of Hick's definition, I would instead like to define salvation in a very general and, hopefully, uncontroversial and neutral way.<sup>8</sup> Let us then understand salvation to mean one's movement from that which is without any ultimate value to what is ultimately valuable. This account is neutral because many of the terms can be further specified according to one's religious context. 'Movement' for instance, can be understood literally as a movement from one life or world, to the next one. It may also be understood quite differently, as a movement from one spiritual plane to another. In the same way, 'ultimate value' will certainly be seen differently by the different religions, while all religions will nonetheless see themselves as effective in bringing about the movement toward it.

The reason for my neutrality in defining salvation is in order not to beg any important questions. This definition is neutral in relation to exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. It is compatible with exclusivism since it is possible that there is one account of salvation that is the correct one. On this view, every other religion is simply wrong either in what it claims to be ultimately valuable or in its means to achieve it. My definition is also compatible with an inclusivist account as well since it may be the case, although one religion gets it right, that other religions may be helpful in achieving salvation as well. Finally, a pluralist position such as Hick's is compatible with my

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<sup>8</sup> By 'neutral' here I mean neutral vis-à-vis the positions regarding religious diversity, not necessarily neutral regarding religions themselves.

definition of salvation because it may be that each of the major religion's accounts of salvation may be true and compatible. They all may provide "many paths to the same goal."

I should make one caveat, however, regarding the definition. In order for an account of salvation to be a religious account, 'ultimate value' has to be construed as more than simply the value that can be found in a naturalist account of the universe. If we think of the religious domain as dealing with the *transcendent*, in order for there to be salvation in the religiously relevant sense, there must be some spiritual or transcendent dimension of reality to which salvation is directed. Working now with our theory-neutral accounts of religious truth and salvation, let us examine the various positions regarding religious diversity and what I will call the Simple Picture of those positions.

### **The Simple Picture**

#### *Exclusivism*

Exclusivism can be understood as the view that the doctrines of a particular religion are true and those that are opposed to it are false. But this simple definition is strikingly inadequate. Clearly anyone who holds any belief at all believes that his is true and any belief in opposition is false. Under this reading, any religious person who believes that anything is religious claim is true is an exclusivist! More often, however, exclusivism is viewed as the much stronger view that one's religion is the only way that one can *achieve salvation*.

Exclusivism, then, can refer to either of the following two claims:

- E1. The doctrines of only one particular religion are true.  
and,
- E2. Salvation can only be achieved within the bounds of one religion.

Just as we saw above that the problem of religious diversity is twofold, so the response to the problem by the exclusivist is twofold. That is, one may be a *theoretical exclusivist*, i.e. one who believes that only one religion is true, or one may be a *soteriological exclusivist*, i.e. one who believes that only those who are members of that religion can achieve salvation. For the sake of simplicity, I will use ‘exclusivism’ to refer to those who are both theoretical exclusivists and soteriological exclusivists.

The paradigm case of traditional exclusivist beliefs can be found in the Medieval Roman Catholic claim that outside of the Church there is no salvation. Contemporary traditional exclusivists, such as William Lane Craig, support this view by pointing to scripture. As Craig points out, exclusivist references can be found all throughout the New Testament.<sup>9</sup> Speaking of Jesus, in Acts, for example, the author claims, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we are saved.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in the gospel of John, Jesus claims, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>11</sup> Although Craig acknowledges that the message of exclusivism in scripture is a tough doctrine, the

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<sup>9</sup> William Lane Craig, “‘No Other Name’: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ” in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip Quinn and Kevin Meeker, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp 38-40. I will hereafter refer to this anthology as *Religious Diversity*.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 4:12 NIV (New International Version).

<sup>11</sup> John, 14:6 NIV (New International Version).

evidence, he thinks, is undeniable: according to scripture, humankind is sinful and the *only* way out of that sin is through Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

Christian exclusivists often point to scripture as evidence for the unique truth of Christianity as well. According to this view, there is one religion that more or less “gets it right.” For example, one might contend that God uniquely revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ and, for this reason, Christianity provides the correct picture of God and his relation to humanity. Other religions may contain some truths, but these truths are 1) compatible with the Christian picture, and 2) not as vital as those truths that are uniquely espoused by Christians. R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips both hold this view:

In our view, Christianity is uniquely true... Our commitment to the singular truth of Christianity distinguishes us from religious pluralists.<sup>13</sup>

They argue for their position by appealing to the Biblical and non-Biblical evidence for Christianity’s main claims. Given that a loving God exists and that we are alienated from him, we are led,

...to expect that a particular revelation answering to the specific needs of the human condition, might be provided by God.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, the Christian message as revealed in the Bible uniquely answers this need through its message of salvation demonstrated by the incarnation, death, and resurrection

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<sup>12</sup> Craig, “No Other Name,” 40.

<sup>13</sup> R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips, “A Particularist View: An Evidentialist Approach” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), 243. I will hereafter refer to this volume as *Four Views*.

<sup>14</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 225.

of Jesus Christ. Finally, the truth of this message is well evidenced by the historical record:

The truth of the good news is confirmed by historically well-attested miracles, especially the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. According to the best historical evidence, we have no less than four reliable accounts (namely, the Gospels of the New Testament) of the main events of the life of Jesus and of his self-understanding as God.<sup>15</sup>

For Geivett and Phillips, it may well be the case that some religions have similar conceptions of God and know certain true things about him. Nonetheless, only Christianity has knowledge of Jesus Christ and his unique message of salvation. For this reason, only Christianity approximates the *central* truths of religious phenomena.

### *Pluralism*

Traditionally, the position opposite of exclusivism is pluralism. Defining pluralism, however, is a more difficult task than defining exclusivism. Take, for example, what would seem to lie on the opposite extreme of the exclusivist thesis:

P<sub>A</sub>1: The doctrines of every religion are true.  
and,  
P<sub>A</sub>2: Salvation can be achieved within the bounds of any religion.

Following Meeker, I will call the position that holds P<sub>A</sub>1 and P<sub>A</sub>2 *anarchic pluralism*.<sup>16</sup>

According to this view, *any* religion, whether it is Buddhism, Christianity, Satanism, or the latest internet cult, is not only true but capable of bringing one to salvation. This view has a number of counterintuitive results that need not be addressed here. What is of

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<sup>15</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 227.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Meeker, "Exclusivism, Pluralism, and Anarchy," in *God Matters: Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Raymond Martin (New York: Longman Publications, 2003), 528.

interest here is that the term ‘pluralism’ encompasses a fairly broad range of positions beyond anarchic pluralism.

Take, for example, the position that many pluralists often take. As is the case with the most celebrated pluralist, John Hick, pluralists typically hold a much more selective view regarding the host of world religions. According to Hick, all of the “post-axial traditions,” primarily “Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam,” are, in some sense, equally valid paths to salvation.<sup>17</sup> All of these traditions, according to Hick, share a common goal: “the radical transformation of the human situation.”<sup>18</sup> As I mentioned above, Hick thinks these paths as having a common essence:

But if we stand back from these different conceptions to compare them, we can, I think, very naturally and properly see them as different forms of the more fundamental conception of a radical change from a profoundly unsatisfactory state to one that is limitlessly better because rightly related to the Real.<sup>19</sup>

Whether one agrees that all of the major religions have a similar notion of salvation is an altogether different matter than whether members of the major religions *can actually achieve* salvation. What reason do we have for thinking that no religion is superior in terms of achieving salvation? According to Hick, we can observe how well one has transformed from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. In each culture, those who have achieved such a transformation are looked upon as saints, bodhisattvas, or holy persons. We can recognize a saint in that he or she has either withdrawn from the world in prayer or meditation, or he or she has sought to change the world for the

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<sup>17</sup> John Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” *Religious Diversity*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 55.

<sup>19</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 55.

better.<sup>20</sup> In either case, a saint is recognizable by her outpouring of love and compassion.<sup>21</sup> Looking across cultures, then, at the saints that each of the major religions has produced, Hick concludes that,

...we have no good reason to believe that any one of the great religious traditions has proved itself to be more productive of love/compassion than another.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover,

...we arrive at the modest and largely negative conclusion that, so far as we can tell, no one of the great world religions is salvifically superior to the rest.<sup>23</sup>

On Hick's view, then, it is not that one religion, or any group of closely related religions, is the only path to salvation.<sup>24</sup> Rather, salvation can be achieved by a whole host of religions, even those that are drastically different from one another. One should also note, however, that Hick is not an anarchic pluralist since he does limit the scope of salvation to those "post-axial" religions he calls the "major world religions."

Not only does Hick's pluralism limit the scope of salvation to the major religions, he also limits the scope of religious truth to these religions as well. But, in order to avoid the apparent contradictions between different religious claims, he appeals to a Kantian approach. According to this view, there is a distinction between the divine "noumenal" and its phenomenal appearances. God or the Real *in itself* is inaccessible to human

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<sup>20</sup> Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 56.

<sup>21</sup> Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 56.

<sup>22</sup> Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 58.

<sup>23</sup> Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 58.

<sup>24</sup> Presumably, the set of "closely related religions" would be much smaller than the group of "major world religions" although precisely how the two are delineated is hard to say.

beings; it is transcendent. On the other hand, the way God is *experienced* by humans is a manifestation of the transcendent, or noumenal Real, but it is not the Real itself.

Appealing to this Kantian distinction allows Hick to solve some of the obvious problems with anarchic pluralism. For instance, there is an apparent contradiction between the Hindu view that Brahman is impersonal and the Muslim view that God is personal. According to his distinction between the Real *an sich* and the Real as it appears to human beings, this contradiction can be passed over as a disagreement over the phenomenal Real. The noumenal Real itself is neither personal nor impersonal. In itself, the Real transcends these categories but simply appears one way in one culture and another way in another culture:

The religious tradition of which we are a part, with its history and ethos and its great exemplars... constitutes an uniquely shaped and coloured “lens” through which we are concretely aware of the Real specifically as the personal Adonai, or as the Heavenly Father, or as Allah, or Vishnu, or Shiva...<sup>25</sup>

According to this brand of pluralism, then, one asserts both,

P<sub>H</sub>1: All major world religions are true.  
and,  
P<sub>H</sub>2: Salvation can be achieved by members of all major world religions.

We can see, then, that there is more than one position that may genuinely be labeled pluralism. Let us, then, define pluralism *in general* as the view that holds the following two claims:

P1: More than one religion is true.  
P2: Salvation can be achieved by those in more than one religion.

Now that we have defined pluralism and exclusivism, it should be clear where inclusivism fits in.

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<sup>25</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 59.

### *Inclusivism*

The inclusivist differs from the exclusivist in that the inclusivist denies E2, but accepts,

P2: Salvation can be achieved by those in more than one religion.

Moreover, the inclusivist differs from the pluralist in that he denies P1 but accepts,

E1: The doctrines of only one particular religion are true.

In this way, inclusivism is purported to be a middle ground between the exclusivist and the pluralist. In the first case, rather than limit salvation to those who are within a given religion, the inclusivist wants to extend salvation to those outside of its bounds. At the same time, the inclusivist wants to maintain that the propositional claims of a particular religion, even those concerning salvation, are true. For example, a Christian inclusivist who believes the propositional claim that salvation is only possible through Jesus Christ will also believe that those who do not believe what the Christian believes may still be saved *through* Jesus Christ. An inclusivist, then, can be said to be a *theoretical exclusivist*. Given that the inclusivist will allow salvation for those from multiple religions, one might say that the inclusivist is a *soteriological pluralist*.

Clark H. Pinnock is a Christian who holds this inclusivist view. While Pinnock does think that Christianity is ultimately true, those from other religions are also capable of achieving salvation, and, in fact, have some limited knowledge of God. Thus, while Pinnock affirms that,

In Christ, God was uniquely and definitively present and at work decisively for the salvation of humanity...,<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Clark Pinnock, "An Inclusivist View," in *Four Views*, 104.

he also believes that the Holy Spirit is, in some way, apparent to all. Because of this, those from non-Christian religions can also be saved:

Christ, then, is the Savior of all people, but they do not all come to him at once historically... People have to be given time to find their way home. Not all of those who will eventually come have yet found Jesus or entered into the communion of Christ's church... Christians do not have a monopoly on the Spirit...<sup>27</sup>

In this way, Pinnock walks the fine line of inclusivism, affirming the ultimate truth and superiority of Christianity while allowing competing religions more access to truth and salvation than the traditional exclusivist.

#### *A Fourth Alternative*

There is one curious position remaining worth mentioning, although I know of no one who seriously advocates it. This is the view that espouses the conjunction of P1 and E2

P1: More than one religion is true.  
and,  
E2: Salvation can only be achieved within the bounds of one religion.

On this view, more than one religion is approximately true, although salvation is only possible through one religion. One could suppose that one religion is simply the only effective program for directing one to that which is of ultimate value. This is the case despite the fact that this religion is not theoretically superior to other religions. Let us call this unusual position, for lack of any other term, *specificism*.

Given what we have said regarding these positions, one might find the distinction between the four positions to be quite simple. This "Simple Picture" can be illustrated as follows:

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<sup>27</sup> Pinnock, 105.

**Fig 1.1 The Simple Picture**

	E1: Only one true religion	P1: More than one true religion
E2: Salvation possible only in one religion.	Exclusivism	Specificism
P2: Salvation possible in more than one religion	Inclusivism	Pluralism

**Difficulties with the Simple Picture:**

As I see it, there are at least two difficulties with the simple picture, both due to vagueness. The first problem points out vagueness on the soteriological, or vertical, dimension. Although there seems to be no room for vagueness between E2 and P2, Kevin Meeker makes the argument that the difference between pluralism and exclusivism, for example, is only a matter of degree.<sup>28</sup> Pluralists such as Hick, i.e. those that reject anarchic pluralism, are quite selective when describing which religions are capable of bringing salvation. Hick includes only the great world religions under the pluralist canopy because it is only in these religions where we find spiritual and moral saints.<sup>29</sup> For this reason, Meeker labels Hick’s brand of pluralism a type of “*Selective Pluralism*” in that it selects only certain religions as capable of leading to salvation.<sup>30</sup> In this way, Hick’s pluralism is “exclusive” in the sense that it excludes some religions and includes others.

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<sup>28</sup> Kevin Meeker, “Exclusivism, Pluralism, and Anarchy,” 530-3. See also Gavin D’Costa, “The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions,” *Religious Studies* 32 (June 1997), 232.

<sup>29</sup> John Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 56.

<sup>30</sup> Meeker, “Exclusivism, Pluralism, and Anarchy,” 529.

Given the distinctions I have made above, this point is not at all troubling. While a so-called “selective pluralist” is exclusive in a sense, it still counts as a type of pluralism because P2 only claims that *more than one* religion is salvifically efficacious. But, there is more to Meeker’s argument. He points out that what the pluralist holds is not all that different from what many exclusivists claim. On his view, exclusivism is not as exclusive as it originally seemed:

Let us say that *Religious Exclusivism* is the view that only one religion – or a set of closely related religions or practices – provides salvation or essential spiritual nourishment.<sup>31</sup>

Why does Meeker define exclusivism in this way? Meeker argues that many exclusivists actually hold this view:

More specifically, many exclusivist Christians believe not only that infants who perish go to heaven but also that many pre-Christian figures, such as Abraham, Rahab, David, and Jeremiah are in heaven as well despite the fact that none explicitly held to Christian doctrine. Their faith, while not explicitly Christian, was salvifically efficacious because it was *sufficiently similar* to Christianity.<sup>32</sup>

If we define exclusivism in this way, we see two things. First, the exclusivist thesis that we saw in the Simple Picture is (surprise) too simple. Exclusivists, while limiting salvation to a small group, most often do not limit it to one particular religion. If I were to continue to define E2 as I have, hardly anyone who calls themselves exclusivists would be considered exclusivists. It would be more accurate then, to adopt Meeker’s definition of soteriological exclusivism. Following his lead, then, I will redefine E2 as:

E2\*: Salvation can only be achieved within the bounds of one religion or set of closely related religions.

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<sup>31</sup> Meeker, “Exclusivism, Pluralism, and Anarchy,” 530.

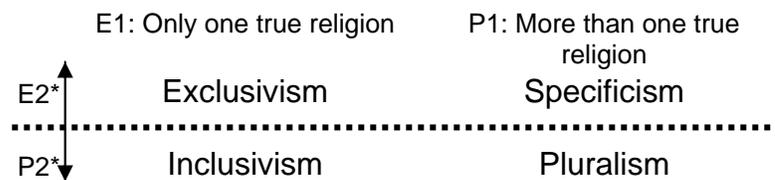
<sup>32</sup> Meeker, “Exclusivism, Pluralism, and Anarchy,” 530. Emphasis is mine.

In changing E2, however, we also need to alter P2 in order to make the two mutually exclusive. Thus, I will redefine P2 as:

P2\*: Salvation can be achieved by those outside of the bounds of one religion or set of closely related religions.

In order to become more accurate, however, we have unintentionally created vagueness concerning the distinction between E2 and P2. According to Meeker, the difference between pluralism and exclusivism is “at best a difference in degree.”<sup>33</sup> This seems true. Depending on how wide we define “sets of closely related religions,” the boundary between exclusive positions and inclusive and pluralist ones, will vary. Meeker suggests that the sharp divisions of the Simple Picture should be replaced with a “continuum of possible positions.”<sup>34</sup> I agree. On one end of the continuum we have the exclusivism of the simple picture, but as we define sets of closely related positions broader and broader, we move from what is clearly exclusivist to what could be defined as inclusivist or pluralist. In Figure 1.2, the dotted line represents the vague boundary between what is demarcated by E2\* and P2\* and the arrows represent the continuum of possible positions that Meeker suggests:

**Fig 1.2 The Continuum Picture**



<sup>33</sup> Meeker, “Exclusivism, Pluralism, and Anarchy,” 531.

<sup>34</sup> Meeker, “Exclusivism, Pluralism, and Anarchy,” 533.

On this picture, exclusivism and specificism are not clearly distinguished from inclusivism and pluralism. The terms merely pick out clear cases on either side, leaving aside the question of where the precise boundary ought to be drawn. Despite the lack of precision, representing the logical space in terms of a continuum is nonetheless helpful in conceptualizing the landscape.

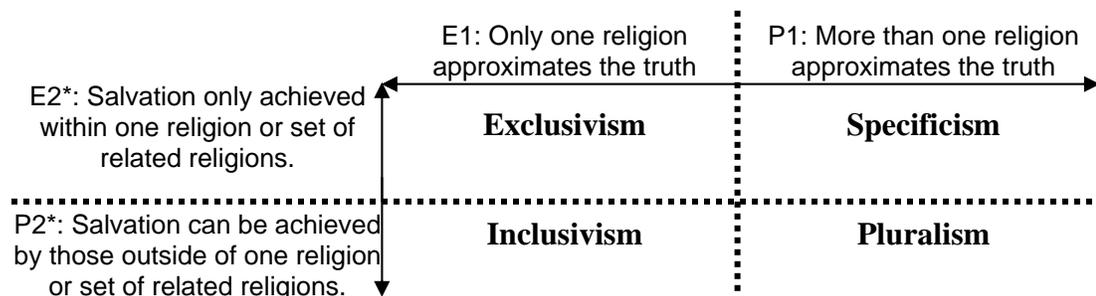
There is, however, a second origin of vagueness, this time between E1 and P1.

Recall that my definition of truth in a religion is itself vague:

A religion, R, can be considered “true” insofar as its propositional claims at least *approximate* the central truths of religious phenomena.

Given the fact that “approximate” can be construed either narrowly or broadly, there again is considerable vagueness between what will count as approximately true and what will not. Thus, it seems that the complete picture is actually a *double* continuum. That is, while there are four categories, there are many positions where it is unclear to which of the four it belongs (see Fig. 1.3).

**Fig 1.3 The Double Continuum Picture**

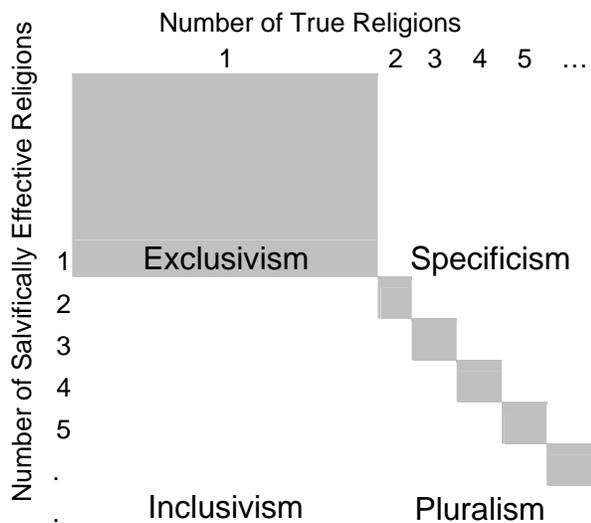


Although exclusivism and pluralism are diametrically opposed in many ways, there is at least one way in which the two are related. For both of these views, there is a direct relationship between the truth of a religion and its salvific efficacy. I will call this

feature of the positions a *truth-dependent soteriology* (or TDS). For those views with a TDS, there will be a one-to-one correspondence between which religions are true and which religions are salvifically efficacious. Inclusivism and specificism do not have a TDS, albeit for two different reasons. For the inclusivist, the scope of salvation is *broader* than the scope of religious truth. For the specificist, the scope of salvation is, curiously, *narrower* than the scope of religious truth.

I should confess at this point that it is not entirely accurate to say that pluralism, like exclusivism, has a TDS. It would be more accurate, instead, to include only some types of pluralism. As can be seen in Figure 1.4, it is not essential to pluralism that there is a one-to-one correspondence between salvation and truth. Those areas shaded in gray have a TDS, while those that are white do not.

**Fig. 1.4: Truth-Dependent Soteriologies**



As can be seen above, pluralism is the only position of the four mentioned, that can come in both varieties, either with or without a TDS. Add to this the fact that the category of pluralism encompasses any position that allows *more than one* religion to be true and

*more than one* religion to be salvifically efficacious, it seems that pluralism is the most versatile of the four positions.

### **My Approach**

Keeping this picture in mind, I will proceed as follows. Ultimately, I will argue for a particular type of pluralism, which I call Critical Pluralism. Critical Pluralism is the conjunction of four theses:

CP1: No one religion is a full description of the truth.

CP2: No one religion *very closely* approximates the truth.

CP3: No one religion is substantially closer to the truth than *all* other religions.

CP4: Some major religions are substantially closer to the truth than *some* other major religions.

I will argue that Critical Pluralism is the best account of religious diversity, i.e. that it is *more likely* to be true than the other accounts. CP1-CP3 are each negations of the following inclusivist positions I1-I3 respectively:<sup>35</sup>

I1: One religion is a full description of the truth.

I2: One religion *very closely* approximates the truth.

I3: One religion is substantially closer to the truth than *all* other religions.

CP4, on the other hand, is the negation of a common pluralist view called, “Egalitarian Pluralism:”

EP: No major religion is substantially closer to the truth than any other major religion.

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<sup>35</sup> I1-I3 are theses held in common between exclusivists and inclusivists. Because I will focus primarily on inclusivism as an alternative to pluralism, I will speak of these three theses as “inclusivist theses.”

In a nutshell, the Critical Pluralist view is this: although no one religion is significantly closer to the truth than every other religion, *some* religions are significantly closer to the truth than *some* others. The diversity of religious beliefs represents a variety of inadequate but partially true accounts of a transcendent reality. Some of these accounts are better than others, but no one religion exclusively captures the truth. My strategy will be to argue that CP1 is a better explanation of religious diversity than I1, CP2 is a better explanation than I2, and so on.

Before proceeding, however, I would like to make one more note about my aim in this work. In arguing that Critical Pluralism is the best account of religious diversity, I am *not* arguing that it is the only rational position to hold. Given one's particular epistemic position, it may be that some people are rationally justified in believing that their own religion is the only true religion. Indeed, I suspect that there are many people who are justified in so believing. If I do not intend to convert such a person to Critical Pluralism, however, what do I seek to accomplish in this work? Following Peter van Inwagen, my aim is to provide a "successful philosophical argument," that is, one that is capable of converting an ideally neutral party.<sup>36</sup> To be more precise, van Inwagen defines a successful philosophical argument in the following way.

An argument for *p* is a success just in the case that it can be used, under ideal circumstances, to convert an audience of ideal agnostics (agnostics with respect to *p*) to belief in *p* – in the presence of an ideal opponent of belief in *p*.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil: The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of St. Andrews in 2003* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 47.

<sup>37</sup> van Inwagen, 47.

On his view, we can imagine an ideal debate between two opponents. One of the opponents attempts to convince the audience that  $p$  while the other attempts to block the argument in every way possible. The argument is successful if it convinces the agnostic audience.

The debate is idealized in the following way. Each opponent is “of the highest possible intelligence and of the highest degree of philosophical and logical acumen,” is intellectually honest, and has an extraordinary amount of patience and unlimited time to discuss the argument.<sup>38</sup> The audience is idealized as well. Not only is the audience agnostic in respect to  $p$  (i.e. they neither believe  $p$  nor believe *not*  $p$ ), they also have no inclination toward accepting  $p$  or rejecting  $p$  in favor of a rival position.<sup>39</sup> Their position in regard to  $p$  is the same as our position regarding “whether the number of Douglas firs in Canada is odd or even.” There is one (very important) exception, however. Contrary to the situation regarding the number of Douglas firs, the idealized audience members are very interested in taking a position of some sort on the question of  $p$ .<sup>40</sup> We can also suppose that the audience is just as intelligent, patient, and intellectually honest as the debaters.<sup>41</sup>

If we imagine that the aim of my argument is to convince an agnostic audience in such an idealized debate, we can see why it would be acceptable that I do not seek to convince certain people to my position. Certainly, a staunch exclusivist or inclusivist will not be convinced by many of my arguments. This is not that unusual in

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<sup>38</sup> van Inwagen, 42-3.

<sup>39</sup> van Inwagen, 44.

<sup>40</sup> van Inwagen, 44.

<sup>41</sup> van Inwagen, 44.

philosophical debate, however. It is often the case that a very good philosophical case can be made for a position despite the fact that this case will be unconvincing to one's most adamant opponents. Nonetheless, I aim to provide strong evidence, compelling to an agnostic on the problem of religious diversity, that each of the four theses of Critical Pluralism is more likely than its negation. I will demonstrate that, for those in a neutral epistemic position, the evidence points toward Critical Pluralism. While certainly no ideal agnostic audience exists, there are enough people that are sufficiently similar to these audience members that this work fulfills an important role. It is to these neutral readers, as well as to those non-neutral readers who are willing to take a dispassionate and neutral attitude toward the following arguments, that this work is directed.

In order to argue for Critical Pluralism, I will first lay out and discuss my major assumptions in Chapter 2. Here, I will provide strong considerations against E2\*. As exclusivism and specificism will be eliminated from consideration, I will seek the correct position somewhere on the continuum between inclusivism and pluralism. Thus, the fundamental concern of my project will be to identify what position one ought to take concerning the *truth problem*. Because truth and, more specifically, approximate truth, will play such an important role, I will discuss the concept of approximate truth in more detail and evaluate the various theories purported to explain it in Chapter 3.

In the final three chapters, I will argue directly for Critical Pluralism. In Chapter 4, I will sketch a view of religions as, in part, theories that model reality. This view will, in effect, demonstrate that CP1 is more likely than I1. In Chapter 5, I will address a variety of inclusivist views and argue that CP2 is more likely than I2 and CP3 is more likely than I3. In Chapter 6, I will discuss the major pluralist positions and argue that

CP4 is more likely than EP. If CP1-CP4 are each more likely than their negations, it follows that Critical Pluralism is the best account of religious diversity.

## **CHAPTER 2:** *Some Basic Assumptions*

In this chapter I would like to further set the foundation for my main argument. In order to argue for Critical Pluralism, I would first like to sketch in some detail what I think are plausible assumptions to start with. Here I will give some reason to think these assumptions are true, but I will not argue for them extensively. For the most part, I will take these as given and argue for my thesis from these starting points. First, I think that the appropriate response to the problem of religious diversity is a specifically religious one. Second, I will assume that the divine or ultimate reality is good and just. Third, the fact that the divine is just seems to imply that salvation is possible for those who are not adherents of a true religion. Let us then examine these assumptions in more detail.

### **Some Truth in Religion**

There are two broad approaches to religious diversity. The first is the approach I will take. It is to find a *religious* answer to the question of religious truth. This approach critically examines the problem of religious diversity, but ultimately claims that there is some truth in religion generally. Perhaps the first philosopher to note the issue of religious diversity was the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes. He takes this first approach by criticizing what he thinks is incorrect about religion, but in the end finds some other religious truth. One of his critiques of the religion of his day was to argue that belief in the Greek gods was no more justified than belief in the gods of other religions:

But mortals consider that the gods are born, and that they have clothes and speech and bodies like their own.

The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair.

But if cattle and horses or lions had hands... horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle....<sup>1</sup>

Given that there are many different religions, all proposing views of the gods mirrored after human particularities, it seems that these gods are mere human inventions. Rather than worship these anthropomorphic gods, Xenophanes argues instead that a universal, unmoving and most powerful God exists that is superior to all of the gods of different cultures.<sup>2</sup> In this way, he has found a particularly *religious* answer to the problem of religious diversity.

The second approach to religious diversity, however, is to cast serious doubt on the whole religious enterprise. For this reason, it is an *anti-religious* approach. This is the approach of David Hume. Hume thinks that the diversity of religious traditions provides evidence against each particular tradition. Speaking primarily about miracles, Hume cites the diversity of religious experiences as a reason to distrust all of them:

...there is no testimony for any [miracle], even those which have not been expressly detected, that is not opposed by an infinite number of witnesses....<sup>3</sup>

For all of those professing to have witnessed a miracle supporting the Christian faith, for instance, there are many more who have witnessed miracles lending support to any of the Buddhist, Muslim or Hindu faiths. And, since Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and

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<sup>1</sup> G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven, and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 169.

<sup>2</sup> Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, 169-70.

<sup>3</sup> David Hume, "Of Miracles," in *Religious Diversity*, 32.

Hinduism cannot all be true, it seems that the contradictory testimony must be dismissed as faulty. Hume suggests that this is precisely what would happen with conflicting testimony in a court of law:

This argument may appear over subtle and refined; but is not in reality different from the reasoning of a judge, who supposes, that the credit of two witnesses, maintaining a crime against one, is destroyed by the testimony of two others, who affirm him to have been two hundred leagues distant, at the same instant when the crime is said to have been committed.<sup>4</sup>

On Hume's account, then, given equal evidence for conflicting truth claims, the rational course of action is to dismiss both claims. Hume's approach, then, is not to find some truth among the diversity of religions, but to question religion itself because of its diversity.

My project will follow the former approach first laid out by Xenophanes. Although religious diversity points out that the evidence for any *particular* religion is often countered by evidence for some other religion, it does not taint the whole religious enterprise. Contrary to Hume, I think that despite its diversity, religious experience provides a general reason to trust that there are fundamentally religious truths. Hume's attempt to discard contrary religious claims on the basis of their contrariness is too dismissive. To take his example, I would argue that if a judge or juror were to hear contrary testimony, she would not simply ignore it altogether. Rather, she might examine the source of the testimony and the surrounding facts to see if one piece of testimony is more trustworthy than the other. Moreover, if there were something common to both, she might trust that bit of information more than the rest. Simply because testimony conflicts does not mean we should dismiss it altogether.

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<sup>4</sup> Hume, 32.

In fact, given the quantity of religious experience, I think it is more likely that Hume's approach is wrong. Hume's example misrepresents the situation. The evidence from religious experience is not akin to one person testifying that he was in place A, while two others testify that he was in place B. A more accurate analogy is what I call the Witness Case:

Six people witness a robbery at night in a poorly lit alleyway. When asked for a description of the robber, their testimony differs dramatically. Three of the five claim to have seen a tall man, but they differ as to his eye, hair, and skin color. Of the other two, one claims to have seen a gorilla, another a short green creature that may be an extraterrestrial, and the last claims to have seen no robber at all.

If the police are trying to track down the robber, should they simply dismiss the testimony altogether because of its inconsistency as Hume suggests? This is clearly not the correct approach to take. If the police took Hume's advice on a regular basis, they would be dismissing large amounts of evidence that has proven useful in convicting criminals. It seems instead that the best approach is to try to sort through the contradictory testimony to try to find out what really happened. At the very least, it seems that they should conclude that a robbery took place although they may not know who or what committed the robbery. To bring the analogy back to the case of religious diversity, it seems that the best response to the vast array of religious experience is not the antireligious claim that diversity nullifies the whole lot. Rather, the religious response that there is some truth in religion, however approximate, seems to be more appropriate. For this reason, my goal will be to find the best of the religious responses to religious diversity in this work.

## The Ultimate is Good

The second assumption I will work with is that ultimate reality, whether it is a personal God or an impersonal ultimate, is good. I understand this to be a rather weak claim. I do not mean that the divine is *all-good*, nor do I mean that the divine *intervenes* for the better throughout history. All that I claim is that there is an ultimately good force in the universe. In other words, we as finite creatures have reason to be optimistic that justice and goodness will ultimately be achieved.

An extensive argument would be required to *demonstrate* the existence of a good ultimate. There is certainly not room to tackle this issue here. Nonetheless, because it is a belief found in a great variety of religions, I believe it is a plausible assumption to start with. If we are to act as the judge and jury, as Hume would have us do, it seems that belief in a good ultimate is at least *prima facie* justified given that it is found in the testimony of many “witnesses.” In many Western religions, for instance, there is the notion of divine judgment after death. In some Eastern traditions, *karma* ensures that everyone will receive what he or she deserves either in this life or in future lives. Certainly, it would be a mistake to conflate these very different Eastern and Western concepts. It would also be a mistake to assume that some conception of ultimate goodness or justice is present in *every* religious tradition. Nonetheless, it seems to be a very reasonable assumption to use as a starting point. If one has doubts about this particular assumption, one may be comforted to know that it will not be used in my main arguments for Critical Pluralism found in later chapters. Only the argument against E2\* in the following section depends on the assumption that there is ultimate goodness or justice in the universe.

## Salvation and Justice

Recall from the previous chapter that E2\* is the claim both exclusivism and specificism share. It claims:

Salvation can only be achieved within the bounds of one religion or set of closely related religions.

I contend that E2\* is false, that salvation can be achieved by those outside of one religion. Given the relative prevalence of exclusivism among theologians and philosophers, my refutation of E2\* deserves a somewhat extensive account. Overall, I argue that given that the ultimate force in the universe is good and just, I think it is plausible to infer the following principle of justice:

PJ: No person is excluded from salvation for reasons beyond his or her control.

PJ is incompatible with any plausible account of E2\*. For the sake of simplicity, I want to focus on Christian exclusivists. I will later point out that parallel arguments could be made to refute other exclusivists as well.

R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips represent the mainstream exclusivist view. They believe:

1. [E]xplicit faith in Jesus Christ is a necessary condition for salvation.<sup>5</sup>

As it turns out, this very strong claim is tempered somewhat in that Geivett and Phillips wish to exclude from the debate the mentally incompetent and infants because both of these classes are not able to have the explicit faith required by 1.<sup>6</sup> They also stray from their extreme soteriology when they include many Old Testament figures among the

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<sup>5</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 243.

<sup>6</sup> Geivett and Phillips, footnote 1, 214-5.

saved because these figures “had received special revelation.”<sup>7</sup> They point out that *now*, once the death and resurrection of Jesus has taken place, salvation is only available through faith in him.<sup>8</sup> Thus, strictly speaking, what Geivett and Phillips claim is:

2. For those who have lived after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and are capable of having beliefs, explicit faith in Jesus Christ is a necessary condition for salvation.

While 1 may represent the extreme end of the soteriological spectrum, 2 represents a step down from this position. Nonetheless, 2 is among the most extreme of soteriologies that are reasonably held and defended by respected philosophers and theologians.

As I mentioned in the first chapter, William Lane Craig holds a position similar to Geivett and Phillips. Like Craig, Geivett and Phillips rely on scripture for much of the support for their claim. Having argued for the accuracy of the Bible as God’s means of special revelation, they point to several passages where it appears undeniable that explicit faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation. In addition to those passages identified by Craig, Geivett and Phillips identify several more places where the Bible clearly points toward faith in Jesus as necessary for salvation. For example:

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.<sup>9</sup>

And:

...then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from

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<sup>7</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 240.

<sup>8</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 240.

<sup>9</sup> John 3:18 NIV (New International Version).

the dead... Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we are saved.<sup>10</sup>

If we are to agree that the Bible is an authentic and accurate vehicle of special revelation that ought to be trusted as divinely inspired, it appears that verses such as these actually support 1.

But this is precisely where the Christian exclusivist first encounters a problem. If passages such as these support 1, why believe 2? If we are to interpret John 3:18 literally, all those who do not believe, whether they lived before Jesus' time or are mentally incompetent, are condemned. Geivett and Phillips, and presumably most Christian exclusivists, however, exclude the infant and the Old Testament patriarch from condemnation. On their view, these people compose a distinct class of persons who are not condemned because John 3:18 does not apply to them. On what basis does the Christian exclusivist make this claim? Seemingly, she does so because of some principle of justice like PJ. Surely, an all-loving God would not exclude from salvation those who died in infancy simply because they did not live long enough to have beliefs. But it is because of this *very same* principle of justice that those such as myself object to both 1 and 2. According to this criticism, exclusivism, at least what we have been calling Christian exclusivism, is severely flawed.

John Hick points out that Christian exclusivism is deeply troubled with what he calls a "moral" difficulty. Citing a principle of justice similar to PJ, he calls attention to the consequences of 2:

The implication is that the large majority of the human race thus far have, through no fault of their own, been consigned to eternal perdition, and that in the future an even larger proportion will meet this fate... But can it

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<sup>10</sup> Acts 4:10,12 NIV (New International Version).

possibly be the will of the loving heavenly Father of Jesus' teaching that only that minority of men and women who have the luck to be born into a Christian part of the world can enter eternal life?<sup>11</sup>

On Hick's view, then, there is an apparent inconsistency between the existence of an all-good God and 2. Because 2 condemns those who do not have explicit faith in Jesus Christ to eternal punishment, some people are condemned although they have never even heard of Jesus Christ. Consider the Native Americans, Aborigines, or any other indigenous peoples after the time of Christ and before Europeans had reached their shores. Because these people had no contact with Christians, they could not have learned about Christ. Thus, it seems that 2 has terribly unjust implications.

Craig tries to avoid Hick's objection by using the notion of "transworld damnation."<sup>12</sup> According to Craig, we cannot claim that God's omnibenevolence is *logically* incompatible with 2. After all, it may be the case that all of those who do not have explicit faith in Jesus Christ and were never given the opportunity to have faith because they never learned of the gospel are *transworldly damned*. That is, God knew that no matter what world he created, they would not have explicit faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, it is irrelevant whether the Native Americans were ignorant of Christ. God could have known that even if they had known of Christ, they would not have believed. Thus, it is not unjust to condemn them.<sup>13</sup>

On its face, this explanation seems completely untenable. It seems absurd to claim that most of the "transworldly damned" happen to live in non-European parts of the

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<sup>11</sup> John Hick, "A Pluralist View," in *Four Views*, 249-50.

<sup>12</sup> Craig, "No Other Name," 50.

<sup>13</sup> Craig, "No Other Name," 50-1.

world before the age of exploration. Craig, however, is not claiming this. He is only maintaining that such a state of affairs is a logical option for God, i.e. that 2 is not logically incompatible with his nature. Perhaps this is not the only option for God. He could, for example, send visions or dreams to those who are not transworldly damned in such cultures so that they are given a means to save themselves. The point is merely that human beings, given our poor epistemic state, cannot claim that God would not condemn the amount of people that would be condemned according to 2. If we know that God is omniscient, there may be very good reason for him to save whom he saves and condemn whom he condemns. Although it may appear morally repugnant to those such as Hick, this is merely a product of our dim moral insights.

Although Craig is correct that it is *logically possible* that those who do not have faith and have not heard the gospel suffer from *transworld damnation*, there is little reason to think that this is the actual state of affairs. In fact, we have some reason to think that his explanation is *not* the case. Consider what qualities one would have to have if, upon hearing the gospel, one believed in Jesus Christ. One would have to be somewhat open-minded, particularly to other cultures and religions. One would probably be somewhat frustrated with one's own religion and thus, eager to hear some other religious account. Lastly, I would expect that such a person would be somewhat spiritually inclined and care about religious matters.

One would suffer from transworld damnation only if she did not have these qualities to any significant degree in every possible world in which she existed. But European explorers found many people in other cultures to be open-minded, frustrated with their religion, and spiritually inclined upon meeting them. This is precisely why

Europeans were able to convert many non-Christians to Christianity. It is *extremely* unlikely, then, that *every* person who never had the chance to hear the gospel lacked these qualities (or whatever qualities are necessary for accepting Christ). Certainly, God *could* have arranged the world in this way if he chose to, but consider what it would be like if that were so. Entire cultures would consist of closed-minded people, fully satisfied with their own culture's religious account, or at the very least, indifferent to religious matters. Given what we know about these cultures from historical records, it seems absurd to think that this was actually the case. Our knowledge of cultures seems to show that no culture is entirely composed of people such as this. Therefore, it seems that Craig's defense of 2 is highly unlikely.

But, if Craig's defense fails, can 2 be defended in any other way? It seems that given PJ, 2 is implausible. If just one person would have accepted Christ had he heard the gospel but never actually did hear it, excluding such a person from salvation would violate PJ. But since this is precisely what the Christian exclusivist must maintain if he does not take Craig's approach, he violates PJ. What is more, the same argument can be applied to non-Christian versions of exclusivism. If *nirvana* is only possible by following the Buddha's teachings, those who never heard of the Buddha's teachings are excluded from salvation for reasons beyond their control. Whatever requirement is necessary for salvation, unless that requirement is somehow available to all, it seems that there will be some people unjustly excluded from salvation.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This may not necessarily be a problem for the Buddhist who does not have a notion of a religious ultimate that ensures that goodness will succeed in the long run. The notion of *karma*, however, may be consistent with my principle of justice (PJ), but there is not room here to determine which religions would accept PJ and which would not.

In response, exclusivists may try to open the possibility of salvation to others through some other mechanism. For example, Geivett and Phillips offer another possible defense of Christian exclusivism:

Some who accept the doctrine of middle knowledge hold that there are individuals who never hear the gospel but would believe if they were to hear it and that God saves them on the basis of his foreknowledge of that fact.<sup>15</sup>

Another possibility is that God gives everyone the opportunity to believe in Christ in the afterlife if they do not have an opportunity in their earthly life. Both of these positions, however, are *inclusivist* rather than *exclusivist* because they make salvation available to those in more than one religion. Thus, even the exclusively minded may resign themselves to some sort of inclusivism because any plausible account of E2\* is inherently unjust. It does not seem too bold, then, to presume that P2\* instead is true: salvation can be achieved by those outside of the bounds of one religion or set of closely related religions.

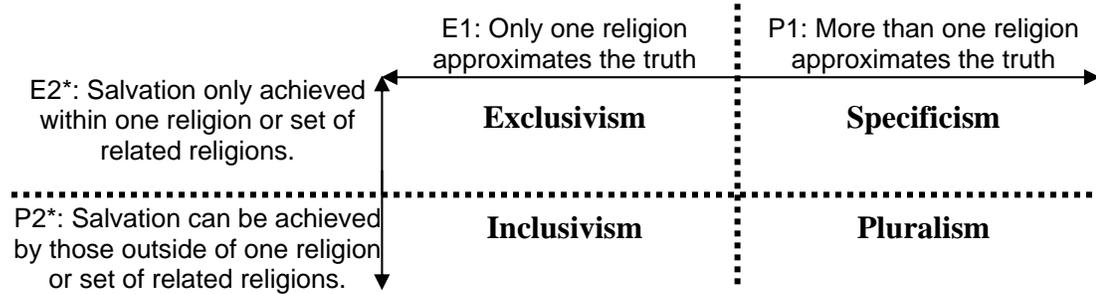
To recapitulate, I have so far argued that the proper response to religious diversity is a *religious* one. I have also argued that the divine or ultimate reality is good and just. From this, I claim that salvation must be available to more than just a single group. Indeed, if the divine is truly just, everyone will at least have the opportunity to achieve salvation.

Examining Figure 1.3 again, it should be clear what the remaining scope of my project is. Now that I have argued for P2\*, my goal is to find where on the continuum from inclusivism to pluralism the correct position lies.

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<sup>15</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 270.

**Fig 1.3 The Double Continuum Picture**



In order to accomplish this goal, it is imperative to discuss at some length the nature of religious truth. According to Figure 1.3, inclusivism and pluralism only differ over the number of religions thought to be true. Although I have given a preliminary analysis of truth in religion, as approximations of religious phenomena, I have yet to give it the attention it demands. For this reason, the following chapter will be devoted to investigating what it means for belief systems such as scientific theories or religions to “approximate the truth.” Using this concept, I will argue in later chapters that no one religion fully describes the truth or is significantly closer to the truth than *every* other religion. Nonetheless, some religions are significantly closer to the truth than *some* others.

### **CHAPTER 3:** *Approximate Truth*

In the previous chapters, I have spoken of religions being “approximately true” rather than simply true or false. I will at last give some account as to what it means for something to be approximately true in this chapter. It should first be noted that in speaking of approximate truth, I do not assume some controversial multi-valued logical system where propositions are true, false, or somewhere in between. In some multi-valued logics, there are three values: truth, falsity, and indeterminacy. In others, all propositions can be attributed a value between 1 and 0 depending on their degree of truth. In my view, however, propositions are either true or false.

Truthlikeness, or verisimilitude, is a concept independent of truth-value. A proposition or set of propositions is more truthlike the more it approximates the *whole truth* of a given matter. Truthlikeness will measure how close a proposition or set of propositions is to The Truth, T, the set of propositions that includes all truths in a given domain. Since truthlikeness is independent of truth-value, even some false propositions may be more truthlike than other falsehoods. Suppose we are trying to determine the number of planets in the solar system and it turns out that there are 9. T is “there are 9 planets in the solar system.” The false proposition, “there are 8 planets in the solar system,” is closer to the truth than the true but uninformative proposition, “either there are 100 planets in the solar system or there are not 100 planets in the solar system.” Although every proposition is either true or false, it is clear that how close a proposition approximates the whole truth of the matter is an independent question. In other words, it

is not only false propositions that can approximate the truth. True propositions may fall short of The Truth as well. Exactly how truthlikeness is determined depends on what theory of truthlikeness one embraces. I will explore these theories shortly.

It should be noted that truthlikeness is not only a problem for logicians and epistemologists. It is a commonsense concept as well. When describing the perpetrator of a crime, witnesses are often asked to describe his or her appearance. These descriptions are often vague and approximate. A witness may describe the criminal as being white, 6 feet tall, dark hair, brown eyes, and a scar on his left cheek. If the police later find a white man, who is 5' 10", has dark hair, green eyes and a scar on the left side of his neck who is connected to the crime, they may use the original witness to further implicate the man. This is because the witness's description, although false, is very *close to the truth*. The police may say that the witness's description is "close enough" to the truth that one may call it accurate. Indeed, the concept of truthlikeness is an everyday concept, a species of the general notion of similarity. Just as it is common to say that two things are similar to each other, it is common to say that one thing is similar to the truth of the matter.

### **The Need for Approximate Truth in Scientific Theories**

It is clear that only in very rare circumstances will a theory describe states of affairs exactly as they are. All of the scientific theories of the past have been shown to be false. It only takes a simple induction to see that the present theories will almost certainly be shown to be false as well. Nonetheless, it seems that some theories are better than others. Newton's physics is not a true theory. It does not accurately describe all matters such as

subatomic physics. If the truth-value of a theory were the whole story, Newton's physics would be no better than Aristotelian physics or superstition. But, since contemporary theories such as General Relativity will someday be falsified as well, it seems that science is no good at finding truth. It merely replaces one false theory with another false theory. The notion of truthlikeness, however, can illustrate how truth can be found in scientific theories despite this fact. Using Kepler's theory of the elliptical orbits of the planets as an example, John Weston describes how the notion of approximate truth can help remedy this problem:

The appearance of absurdity in deducing falsehoods from falsehoods is easily dispelled by means of approximate truth: While it is false that the other planets have no gravitational effect on Mars, and false as well that its orbit is elliptical, both of these statements are, in some sense, approximately true. If we can show that the inference patterns used here will yield approximately true conclusions from approximately true premises, we will avoid pointlessness in applying deductive logic to false theories.<sup>1</sup>

If there were some way of making sense of the notion of approximate truth, one could explain how progress is made in science.<sup>2</sup> Although scientific theories provide inaccurate models of the physical world, progress can be achieved if these theories provide increasingly better approximations. But, how exactly does one define approximate truth? In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several philosophers have attempted to formalize precisely what approximate truth is. Karl Popper was the first to offer such a theory. In 1963, Popper offered the first attempt at a precise definition of truthlikeness.<sup>3</sup> Since that

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<sup>1</sup> John Weston, "Approximate Truth and Scientific Realism," *Philosophy of Science* 59 (1992), 57.

<sup>2</sup> This of course assumes that there *is* progress in science. Although there is not room to argue for it here, I am working with a view of science that would be classified as "realist."

<sup>3</sup> K.R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

time, his theory has been thoroughly refuted. It is nonetheless worth discussing his theory in order to get a grasp of the problem of truthlikeness and the various responses to that problem.

### **Popper's Theory**

Recall that The Truth, T, is the set of propositions that are true in a given domain. In contrast, the set of all propositions that are false, we can call F. For every false theory, there are both true and false consequences. A consequence of a theory, A, will simply be a proposition that is entailed by A. Every proposition entails all logical truths, so even F entails some truths. Let us call the true consequences of a theory its truth content and the false consequences of a theory its falsity content.

Given these definitions, we can define truthlikeness in the following way. B is more truthlike than A if and only if B has more truth content than A without having more falsity content or if B has less falsity content than A without having less truth content.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the only way to clearly measure whether B has more truth content than A is to see if B has A's truth content as a proper subset. In other words, B must contain all of the true consequences that A has plus more. This will leave many theories simply incomparable. If two theories have truth contents (or falsity contents) that do not intersect at all, it will be indeterminate whether one theory is truer than the other.

Although this is a shortcoming of the theory, it is by no means a fatal flaw. Such a fatal

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<sup>4</sup> Oddie, Graham, "Truthlikeness," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2001 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2001/entries/truthlikeness/>>. Hereafter, "Truthlikeness."

flaw does exist in Popper's theory and this was revealed in 1974 when two philosophers independently demonstrated the ineptitude of this theory of truthlikeness.

Unbeknownst to Popper at the time, his theory entails that no false theory is closer to the truth than another. Both Pavel Tichy and David Miller demonstrated this independently.<sup>5</sup> Recall that for any false theory, there is both truth content and falsity content. As it turns out, it would be impossible for any false theory to have more truth content than another without also having more falsity content. Likewise, it would be impossible for any theory to have more falsity content than another without also having more truth content. Thus, no false theory approximates the truth any better than any other false theory. Why is this the case? Suppose B has more truth content than A. It contains the true proposition  $t$  for example. Then, it is also the case that B contains the additional falsehood  $t \& x$  where  $x$  is a falsehood shared by A and B. Likewise, if A has more falsity content than B, it also has more truth content. Suppose this time that A entails the false proposition  $f$ . It would also then entail the true proposition  $f \supset y$  where  $y$  is a truth entailed by both A and B.<sup>6</sup> By Popper's criteria, then, there would never be a situation where one false theory is closer to the truth than another. One theory simply cannot have more truth content than another without also having more falsity content.

In response to the failure of Popper's theory, there have been a number of proposed theories of truthlikeness in two main directions. The first category of theories includes those who attempt to work with Popper's original "content based" view and

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<sup>5</sup> Pavel Tichy, "On Popper's Definitions of Verisimilitude," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 25 (1974) and David Miller, "Popper's Qualitative Theory of Verisimilitude," *The British for the Philosophy of Science* 25, (1974).

<sup>6</sup> Oddie, "Truthlikeness."

modify it to avoid its obvious flaws. The second category takes a more quantitative approach. Rather than comparing the true and false consequences of a theory in terms of the content entailed by that theory, the quantitative or “likeness” approach measures how close the possible worlds false theories describe are to the actual world.

### **Other Content-Based Theories of Truthlikeness**

One interesting content-based theory attempts to block Tichy and Miller’s criticism of Popper’s theory. The proponents of this view, Gerhard Schurz and Paul Weingartner argue that many consequences of a theory are not relevant consequences and irrelevant consequences ought not to matter to whether a theory is closer to the truth or not. For example, if  $a$  is true so is  $a \vee b$ , but this is irrelevant:

For example, if a physicist derives from his theory a sentence  $b$  which claims the future existence of a solar eclipse, he will certainly not count sentences like “ $b$  or the sun will explode tomorrow” etc. as further consequences from his theory – since they are irrelevant.<sup>7</sup>

To simplify, Schurz and Weingartner make use of two general principles. First, a consequence is not relevant if it simply adds a new predicate that could be replaced by literally any other predicate without changing the truth-value of the proposition.<sup>8</sup> In the example they supply above, “the sun will explode tomorrow” could be replaced by any proposition whatsoever and still preserve the truth of the proposition. Thus, it is clear that “ $b$  or the sun will explode tomorrow” is not a relevant consequence of  $b$ . Secondly, a

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<sup>7</sup> Gerhard Schurz and Paul Weingartner, “Verisimilitude Defined by Relevant Consequence-Elements: A New Reconstruction of Popper’s Original Idea,” in *What is Closer-to-the-Truth?: A Parade of Approaches to Truthlikeness*, ed. Theo A.F. Kuipers (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1987), 52.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed analysis of a relevant consequence see Schurz and Weingartner, 54.

consequence is not relevant if it is simply redundant. For example,  $a \ \& \ a$ ,  $a \ \& \ a \ \& \ a$ , ... are not new consequences of  $a$ , they are simply repetitions of the same consequence.

Using these principles, Schurz and Weingartner demonstrate that the objection Tichy and Miller have to Popper's theory only makes use of irrelevant consequences of a proposition. Certainly,  $a \ \& \ b$  is a logical consequence of  $a$  and  $b$ . But, as Schurz and Weingartner point out, a scientist would hardly consider the conjunction of two truths to count as the discovery of a new truth. Recall that Popper's theory fails because for every unique truth,  $t$ , a theory has as a consequence, it also has a falsehood,  $t \ \& \ f$  (where  $f$  is a falsehood common to both theories). But, according to Schurz and Weingartner,  $t \ \& \ f$  is an irrelevant consequence. Indeed, it certainly seems intuitive that  $t \ \& \ f$  is an irrelevant consequence. For example, suppose God exists. When comparing two religious theories,  $A$  and  $B$ . Theory  $A$  includes God's existence as a consequence. But, it also has as a consequence "God exists and  $f$ " where  $f$  is a falsehood common between  $A$  and  $B$ . Should we then think that theory  $A$  is no closer to the truth than theory  $B$  because theory  $A$  has an additional truth only with an additional falsehood as well? The falsehood "God exists and  $f$ " appears not to be relevant at all since it only adds two truths together that are already included as consequences of the theory. If one applies the relevance logic of Schurz and Weingartner, one sees that conjoining a unique truth with a common falsehood does not create a relevant new falsehood, nor does making a unique falsehood the antecedent in a conditional create a relevant new truth (such as  $f \supset y$ ). If one restricts the amount of logical consequences to simply relevant logical consequences, Popper's theory can still be preserved.

In addition to Schurz and Weingartner, others have offered content-based approaches in the hopes of avoiding the flawed Popperian program. According to Oddie, W.H. Newton-Smith proposes a way to measure infinite sets of true and false consequences of a theory, something Popper failed to do satisfactorily.<sup>9</sup> Theo A.F. Kuipers and David Miller offer content-based theories of a different sort.<sup>10</sup> According to them, truthlikeness is determined by comparing models or structures rather than sentences as Popper and others have.

While these attempts to resurrect Popper's theories suggest creative solutions to the problem, it is not necessary to discuss all of the details of these theories for the following reason. Any "content based" approach to truthlikeness suffers from the same flaw. According to Graham Oddie the content-based approach fails because it contradicts our basic intuitions about truthlikeness.<sup>11</sup> Despite the variety of these theories, Oddie argues, they all have a striking commonality:

[T]he degrees of truthlikeness of propositions with the same truth value are determined solely by considerations of content. And in most cases the account delivers the result that the greater the degree of content, the greater the degree of truthlikeness.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Graham Oddie, "The Poverty of the Popperian Program for Truthlikeness," *Philosophy of Science* 53 (1986), 164. See W. H. Newton-Smith, *The Rationality of Science*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

<sup>10</sup> See Theo A.F. Kuipers, "A Structuralist Approach to Truthlikeness," in *What is Closer-to-the-Truth: A Parade of Approaches to Truthlikeness*, ed. Theo A.F. Kuipers (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 1987) and David Miller, "On Distance from the Truth as a True Distance," *Essays on Mathematical and Philosophical Logic*, eds. J. Hintikka, I. Niiniluoto, and E. Saarinen (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978).

<sup>11</sup> See Oddie, "The Poverty of the Popperian Program for Truthlikeness," 167.

<sup>12</sup> Graham Oddie, "The Picture Theory of Truthlikeness," in *What is Closer-to-the-Truth: A Parade of Approaches to Truthlikeness*, ed. Theo A.F. Kuipers (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 1987), 25.

In other words, content theories in the mold of Popper's theory make truthlikeness a function of two things: truth-value and logical strength/content. Now, it may seem quite plausible that among true theories, the theory that is logically stronger is closer to the whole truth. Things aren't quite that simple, though, when it comes to comparing false theories. As Oddie argues,

There are really only two plausible candidates. Either a false theory is judged the more truthlike the greater its content, or it is judged the more truthlike the less its content. But both accounts are absurd... and so the program that uses truth and falsity content alone is doomed to failure.<sup>13</sup>

For the sake of this and later explanations, let me introduce a simple example common in the truthlikeness literature. Imagine a simple world with only three basic states: hot, rainy, and windy. There are three basic propositions that stand for these states: h, r, and w respectively. Using this simple language, testing our intuitions about truthlikeness should be easier.

Suppose the truth is that it is hot, windy, and rainy. The following is the whole truth:

(T) h & r & w

If this is so, it seems quite clear that h & r is close to the truth and  $\neg h$  and  $\neg r$  is relatively far from the truth. Oddie demonstrates quite clearly that basic intuitions concerning truthlikeness are not tied to logical strength at all. He asks one to consider the following table:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Oddie, "The Poverty of the Popperian Program for Truthlikeness," 167.

<sup>14</sup> Oddie, "The Poverty of the Popperian Program for Truthlikeness," 167.

- (1)  $\neg h \ \& \ \neg r \ \& \ \neg w$
- (2)  $\neg h \ \& \ \neg r$
- (3)  $\neg h$
- (4)  $\neg h \ \& \ r$
- (5)  $\neg h \ \& \ r \ \& \ w$

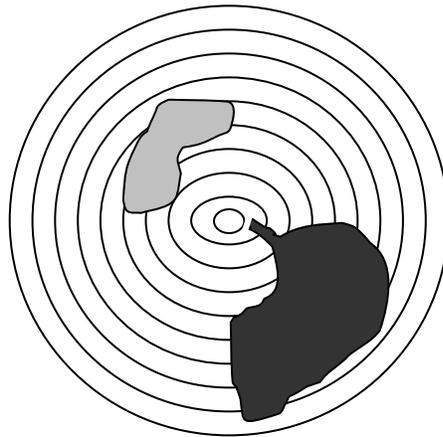
Intuitively, these propositions become more truthlike as one approaches (5). Notice also that as this happens, one does not also see a corresponding increase or a corresponding decrease in logical strength. Indeed, content clearly decreases as it approaches (3) and then increases after (3). Moreover, (1) through (5) are all false. How can it be then that truthlikeness is a function of truth-value and strength? It seems that Oddie has provided a clear counterexample.

Upon further reflection, the notion of a content-based theory is not even *prima facie* plausible. Even if Schurz and Weingartner are correct that Popper's notion of truthlikeness can be applied by limiting the consequences of a theory to only its relevant ones, this does not make the theory any more plausible given counterexamples such as the one above. Recall that according to the Popperian program, a theory A is closer to the truth than a theory B when A has more truths without having any more falsehoods or if it has less falsehoods without sacrificing any truths. Oddie's objection to this approach is that the sheer number of true or false consequences is often unrelated to a theory's truthlikeness as the above examples demonstrate. To continue to follow a content-based theory based on these intuitive flaws would be a mistake. For this reason, Tichy and Oddie, as well as Risto Hilpinen and Ilkka Niiniluoto have developed what Oddie calls a "likeness" approach to truthlikeness.

## The Likeness Approach

According to this approach, theory A is closer to the truth than theory B, not because it entails more truths than B, but because *it describes a set of possible worlds closer to the actual world* than B. Different likeness-based theories of truthlikeness vary on how they measure closeness between worlds. Hilpinen, taking inspiration from Popper, offers a set theoretic method for making such a measurement. Imagine a series of spheres nested in one another as in Figure 3.1.

**Figure 3.1: Spheres of Truthlikeness**



The bull's-eye is the actual world and spheres around the bull's-eye represent worlds of decreasing similarity to the actual world. While some theories may describe a set of worlds clearly more similar to the actual world than others, there are other cases that are not so clear. Hilpinen would measure the truthlikeness of different theories as follows. Let the gray area above represent theory A and the black area above represent theory B. We can find a sort of average distance the theory is from the truth by looking at the innermost and outermost spheres that border on the area. Call the smallest sphere that

includes all of  $A$ ,  $max A$ . Call the largest sphere that does not include any of  $A$ ,  $min A$ . If  $min A$  is a subset of  $min B$  and  $max A$  is a proper subset of  $max B$  then  $A$  is closer to the truth than  $B$ . The same is true if  $min A$  is a proper subset of  $min B$  and  $max A$  is a subset of  $max B$ .<sup>15</sup> To put it in more ordinary language,  $A$  is closer to the truth than  $B$  if  $min A$  is closer to the truth than  $min B$  without  $max A$  being further from the truth  $max B$ . Likewise,  $A$  is closer to the truth than  $B$  if  $max A$  is closer to the truth than  $max B$  without  $min A$  being further from the truth than  $min B$ .

There are a number of criticisms of Hilpinen's theory. Oddie points out that this theory does not allow any false theory to be closer to the truth than any true theory.<sup>16</sup> While not a devastating objection, Oddie finds it to be counterintuitive. Suppose that there are 9,893 jellybeans in a jar. One theory says there are 9,892 jellybeans and another theory says that either there are 7 jellybeans or there are not 7 jellybeans in the jar. It certainly looks as if the first theory is closer to the truth than the second. But, on Hilpinen's view, such an intuition is not upheld. Since any true theory includes the "bull's-eye" in Figure 2.1, the  $min$  for that theory will necessarily be less than any theory that does not include the "bull's-eye" no matter how close it is. For this reason, no false theory is closer to the truth than any true theory. Another criticism of Hilpinen's theory is the fact that it is too rough to provide an accurate comparison. Since only the  $min$  and  $max$  are considered in the measurement, what goes on in between is not taken into account. This becomes a problem if one theory describes a set of worlds mostly close to the truth and a few worlds far from the truth. Such a theory is judged farther from the

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<sup>15</sup> Graham Oddie, *Likeness to Truth*, (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1986), 51-53.

<sup>16</sup> Oddie, *Likeness to Truth*, 54.

truth than it should be. One can deal with this problem by weighing the *min* and *max* differently. Ilkka Niiniluoto suggests what he calls the *mini-sum* distance measure, which involves measuring the *min* as well as the sum of the various other distances.<sup>17</sup> Tichy has proposed the most straightforward and commonsense solution. He suggests a theory of truthlikeness based on *averaging* the distance worlds are from the truth.<sup>18</sup>

Recall our hot-rainy-windy framework. Suppose that these three states are the only basic states in our domain and, for simplicity, suppose that all three are equally important. Granting these assumptions, one can calculate truthlikeness with a simple averaging technique. If the truth is that it is hot, rainy, and windy, the claim that it is hot, rainy, and not windy would be of distance 1/3 from the truth. One out of the three claims differs from the whole truth. The claim that it is hot, not rainy, and not windy would likewise be 2/3 from the truth. For each of the eight combinations of these three states, a distance from the truth can be assigned by examining how many of the basic states differ from the whole truth:

$$(W1) h \ \& \ r \ \& \ w = 0$$

$$(W2) h \ \& \ r \ \& \ \neg w = 1/3$$

$$(W3) h \ \& \ \neg r \ \& \ w = 1/3$$

$$(W4) \neg h \ \& \ r \ \& \ w = 1/3$$

$$(W5) h \ \& \ \neg r \ \& \ \neg w = 2/3$$

$$(W6) \neg h \ \& \ \neg r \ \& \ w = 2/3$$

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<sup>17</sup> For the technical details, see Ilkka Niiniluoto, "How to Define Verisimilitude," in *What is Closer-to-the-Truth: A Parade of Approaches to Truthlikeness*, ed. Theo A.F. Kuipers (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 1987).

<sup>18</sup> Pavel Tichy, "On Popper's Definitions of Verisimilitude."

$$(W7) \neg h \ \& \ r \ \& \ \neg w = 2/3$$

$$(W8) \neg h \ \& \ \neg r \ \& \ \neg w = 1$$

W8 is the furthest from the truth because it has no component in common with the whole truth. Using this method, truthlikeness can be measured *and* given a numerical distance measure, something set theoretical methods fail to do.

What about propositions that withhold judgment on one or two of these basic states? How would the distance from truth be measured? To account for cases such as these, Tichy defines distance from truth in terms of a proposition's "disjunctive normal form:"

The 'distance' between two constituents can be naturally defined as the number of primitive sentences negated in one of the constituents but not the other. The verisimilitude of an arbitrary sentence *a* can then be defined as the arithmetical mean of the distances between the true constituent *t* and the constituents appearing in the disjunctive normal form of *a*.<sup>19</sup>

If a theory (expressed as a proposition) claimed that it was hot and not rainy, we could put this in a disjunctive form as follows:

$$(W9) (h \ \& \ \neg r \ \& \ w) \vee (h \ \& \ \neg r \ \& \ \neg w)$$

Because W9 is equivalent to the disjunction of W3 and W5, one can calculate the distance W9 is from the truth by averaging W3 and W5 to get 1/2. Following such a method we can calculate the truthlikeness of the following claims as well:

$$(W10) h \ \& \ r = 1/6$$

$$(W11) \neg h \ \& \ \neg r = 5/6$$

$$(W12) h = 1/3$$

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<sup>19</sup> Pavel Tichy, "On Popper's Definitions of Verisimilitude," 159.

$$(W13) \neg h = 2/3$$

$$(W14) h \vee \neg h = 1/2$$

In more complex systems, it will be necessary to place different weights to each of the basic states. For example, when describing a criminal for a police sketch artist, one's gender, size, and skin color should receive greater weight than the style of shoes the criminal was wearing. A description of the criminal that describes everything correctly except for the criminal's shoes, socks, and watch style will be closer to the truth than a description that gets everything right except for the criminal's skin color and gender. Some differences will count more than others. For this reason, Tichy's method can be applied using *weighted averages* in almost all cases.

Tichy contends that his method not only provides a numerical distance measure, but also provides intuitive results. Intuitively, W1 through W8 are ordered accurately using Tichy's distance measure. In the same way, it seems correct that W11, that it is not hot and not rainy, is certainly far from the truth. But it is equally clear that it is not as far from the truth as the bolder claim that it is not hot, not rainy, and not windy (W8). W8 is as far from the truth as one can get. By withholding judgment on one of the three basic states, one improves in at least a small respect. Oddie argues that Tichy's method also has the benefit of allowing some truths to be farther from the truth than some falsehoods. For example, W3 gets two out of the three basic states correct and seems rather close to the truth. One can imagine a language with millions of basic states where a proposition picks out all but one correctly. Such a proposition is very close to the truth. On the other hand, any tautology, while true, always has a distance of  $1/2$  from the truth. This seems to match with our intuitions. A very advanced theory of physics such as General Relativity

that describes many things correctly in all likelihood will be falsified at some point. But surely such a theory is *closer to the truth* than the tautology: “Either Aristotelian physics is correct or it is not correct.” Any theory of truthlikeness that is unable to pass this intuitive test must be flawed.

Although Tichy’s method provides pleasant results, it also encounters some challenges. First, the system may seem to work well for the simple weather framework, but for more complex cases, such as cases of infinite worlds or propositions using higher-order logic, it is unclear how to calculate the distance a proposition is from the truth. Tichy has provided a method for solving this problem based on Jaako Hintikka’s distributive normal forms that has received praise from Oddie and Niiniluoto.<sup>20</sup> The largest challenge to Tichy’s system comes from David Miller who asserts that according to Tichy, truthlikeness is relative to a given language. Because it seems that truthlikeness ought to be a property of theories regardless of language, Miller’s objection is potentially fatal.

### **Language Invariance**

Miller claims that, according to Tichy’s theory, the truthlikeness of various propositions depends on the language it is translated into.<sup>21</sup> For example, suppose instead of the hot-rainy-windy language (h-r-w from now on), we use a different framework. There are again three atomic sentences, ‘h’ is hot, ‘m’ is “Minnesotan,” and ‘a’ is “Arizonan.”

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<sup>20</sup> See Pavel Tichy, “Verisimilitude Redefined,” *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 27 (1976), 28-33.

<sup>21</sup> David Miller, “Popper’s Qualitative Theory of Verisimilitude.”

Let's call this language h-m-a. "Minnesotan" means in h-r-w, "it is hot if and only if it is rainy," while "Arizonan" means in h-r-w, "it is hot if and only if it is windy." On this framework, h-r-w can be translated into h-m-a easily. m is equivalent to  $h \equiv r$  and a is equivalent to  $h \equiv w$ . Likewise, if we want to translate the other way, r is equivalent to  $h \equiv m$  and w is equivalent to  $h \equiv a$ . Miller has us compare the following pairs of sentences. The first in each pair is a proposition in h-r-w while the latter is the same proposition translated into h-m-a.

- (A)  $\neg h \ \& \ r \ \& \ w$   
 (A')  $\neg h \ \& \ \neg m \ \& \ \neg a$
- (B)  $\neg h \ \& \ \neg r \ \& \ \neg w$   
 (B')  $\neg h \ \& \ m \ \& \ a$

If we suppose that the truth is  $h \ \& \ m \ \& \ a$  (and  $h \ \& \ r \ \& \ w$ ), it turns out that A is closer to the truth than B while A' is *further from the truth* than B'. But clearly this could not be the case if truthlikeness were translation invariant. If it were, then A would be as close to the truth as A'. It seems that such a theory of truthlikeness is unsatisfactory. If a scientific theory is close to the truth, it should remain so despite being described in a foreign language!

There are a couple ways one can respond to Miller's clever objection. First, one could claim that h-r-w is a more natural language while h-m-a is somehow contrived. This is the same response realists give in response to the problem of "grue." How does one know whether emeralds are green rather than "grue," where "grue" is the property of being green if examined before a certain date in the future and blue otherwise? Realists often argue that emeralds are green rather than grue because grue is an artificial property that is "made up," while green is a "natural" property; it carves reality at the joints. But,

this response, as Oddie points out,<sup>22</sup> is dependent on the premise that certain properties are natural or privileged, while others are mere concoctions. This is a premise Oddie is reluctant to affirm because of the controversial nature of such properties. In the case of h-r-w and h-m-a, there is no clear sense in which rainy and windy are privileged while Minnesotan and Arizonan are not. Clearly, Miller “made up” the latter language as a modification of the former, but this is not enough to say that one set of properties is privileged.

The response to Miller that Oddie favors is bold, yet unique. His claim is that h-r-w is in fact not translatable to h-m-a and thus does not provide a counterexample to Tichy’s theory:

A proposition is a dichotomy of a logical space. However, h-r-w and h-m-a feature entirely different logical spaces. The worlds of the former are functions from the set of traits {*hot, rainy, windy*} to the truth values. The worlds of the second space are functions from {*hot, Minnesotan, Arizonan*} to the truth values. Since functions with distinct domains are never identical the two spaces share no element in common.... The two languages are simply not intertranslatable.<sup>23</sup>

But at first glance this seems absurd. Despite Oddie’s succinct refutation, it seems clear that the two languages *are* intertranslatable. If one simply uses the equivalencies Miller establishes, translation follows quite easily. For each proposition in h-r-w, there is a sentence in h-m-a that picks out the same set of possible worlds.

Oddie’s point, however, is a bit more subtle. Let’s use the worlds picked out by A and A’ and see if they are in fact identical. Oddie points out that, although it is rainy and windy in those worlds (as well as not hot), there is at least one property that the

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<sup>22</sup> Oddie, *Likeness to Truth*, 159.

<sup>23</sup> Oddie, *Likeness to Truth*, 141.

worlds picked out by A do not have in common with the worlds picked out by A'. As one can see, the *reversal* of each world, where each atomic sentence is negated, is not identical:

Rev(A)	h & ¬r & ¬w
Rev(A')	h & m & a

The reversal of A' is, on Miller's standards, equivalent to h & r & w. This clearly is not the same as the reversal of A. Because A and A' have at least one property not held in common, it follows from Leibniz's Law that A is not identical to A'.<sup>24</sup> Oddie appeals to the notion of semantic holism to further justify the distinction.

According to semantic holism, each atomic sentence ('h,' 'r,' or 'w') derives its meaning not only from the property it describes but the framework of the language as a whole. On this view even the meaning of 'h' will vary depending on whether it is used in h-r-w or h-m-a despite the fact that it corresponds to the property of being hot. Suppose for example that it is hot, rainy, and windy. If this is the case, then the following two propositions are true:

h & r & w

h & m & a

But, suppose that we were to tell speakers of each language that the temperature will drop and it will no longer be hot although nothing else will change. Now, since 'h' is common to both languages, it would seem that we are imparting the same information to speakers of both languages. But in fact we are not. The h-r-w speaker now knows that it will be not hot, rainy and windy, while the speaker of h-m-a knows that it will be not hot,

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<sup>24</sup> Oddie, *Likeness to Truth*, 142.

Minnesotan and Arizonan (in other words, not hot, not rainy, and not windy).<sup>25</sup> The meaning of ‘hot,’ although seemingly consistent between languages, actually carries different meaning because of the different language framework that it operates in. All of this is to say that Miller’s objection to Tichy’s theory fails. Miller tried to prove that, on Tichy’s theory, degree of truthlikeness is not preserved when translating between languages. As it turns out, however, Miller’s objection only works for languages that are not intertranslatable.

It should be clear from what is written above that I have been favoring, and for the most part defending, Tichy’s theory of truthlikeness. It appears to me to capture the clearest intuitions involved in the truthlikeness literature. As others have shown, however, there are some shortcomings. Firstly, if Oddie’s rebuttal of Miller’s objection is correct, there is a concern that conceptual frameworks are incommensurate.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, there are concerns when applying Tichy’s theory to real cases more complex than the three atomic state cases. Although, there are proposals for accommodating higher complexity, J.L. Aronson points out that the intuitions are not so clear when dealing with languages containing more basic states.<sup>27</sup> To be more specific, as more basic states are “discovered,” the truthlikeness of true propositions decreases while the truthlikeness of basic false propositions increases. Returning to the basic state, “hot,” let us now suppose that there are millions of basic states. Even if it is hot, ‘h’ is no longer

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<sup>25</sup> This is Oddie’s example. In his version, there are two domes where weather is controlled by switches. In one dome, the switches are h, r, and w, in the other they are h, m, and a. By switching the “h switch” in each dome, the weather pattern in each dome differs. See *Likeness to Truth*, 144-5.

<sup>26</sup> Oddie, “Truthlikeness.”

<sup>27</sup> Stathis Psillos, *Scientific Realism: How Science Tracks Truth* (London: Routledge, 1999), 268. See also J.L. Aronson, “Verisimilitude and Type Hierarchies,” *Philosophical Topics* 18 (1990).

1/3 from the truth. Instead, as the number of states increases, the truthlikeness of 'h' approaches 1/2. Likewise, if there are millions of basic states, '¬h' approaches 1/2 as well (although from the other direction). This seems to make comparison between h and ¬h nearly impossible as well as strangely dependent on the number of states that are discovered.<sup>28</sup> I think this problem can be solved simply by making truthlikeness context-dependent. Indeed, this is the solution Niiniluoto suggests.<sup>29</sup> If the context is the weather, then the millions of basic states other than weather related ones are not relevant in this case. The sentence 'h' is then a great deal closer to the truth than ¬h. However one resolves these sorts of objections, the fact remains that there is still considerable disagreement regarding which theory of truthlikeness is the correct one. Tichy's theory is by no means the consensus favorite in the literature.

### **Assessing Theories of Truthlikeness**

Recall that theories of truthlikeness were first proposed as a way to make sense of scientific progress. If Theory A is falsified and replaced by Theory B, which is then falsified and replaced by Theory C, there seems to be a sense in which Theory B was at least "more true" than Theory A. And, given that discarded theories are still helpful in making predictions and giving rough and ready explanations and predictions of phenomena, it seems that, although false, they are in some sense better than purely nonsensical theories. Given that the notion of likeness to truth is capable of being

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<sup>28</sup> Psillos, 268.

<sup>29</sup> Psillos, 269.

successfully formalized in a number of different ways, it seems that truthlikeness is a concept worthy of investigation and not merely a figment of the imagination.

At the same time, one needs to keep in mind that theories of truthlikeness are themselves “theories” which are more or less close to truth. It is highly unlikely that one of the theories of truthlikeness described in this chapter is the correct theory. More than likely, some are closer to the truth than others, but also have shortcomings. Tichy’s theory seems to be the best theory developed so far and I will appeal to it primarily in future chapters. Nonetheless, there is still work left to be done in order to apply it to more complicated cases and defend it from further objections, which will more than likely lead to revisions and further revisions of the theory. The theory is itself, I believe, only approximately true. Chris Brink sees the theories of truthlikeness or verisimilitude as similar to different ways to build a mathematical model:

We build a model of verisimilitude, or computability, or necessity, in the same sense as an applied mathematician builds a model of population growth, or wave forms, or predator-prey relationships.... For example, recall that Tichy, Miller and Niiniluoto all approach the problem of verisimilitude via the notion of *distance*. But why distance?... In the case of Tichy/Oddie and Niiniluoto, the charge of arbitrariness is compounded by the fact that their concept is of *numerical* distance, which makes verisimilitude a linear ordering (i.e. any two theories are comparable)... ...nobody said it *must* be so, [they] simply choose to *model* it like that.<sup>30</sup>

In lieu of any consensus theory of truthlikeness, one may take the view that the theories are approximate models. Another approach is suggested by Stathis Psillos. Psillos, a defender of scientific realism, finds himself unsatisfied with any of the theories of truthlikeness, but not with the intuitive notion of truthlikeness itself:

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<sup>30</sup> Chris Brink, “Verisimilitude: Views and Reviews” *History and Philosophy of Logic* 10 (1989), 199.

I am personally skeptical about the prospects of *formalising* the notion of truth-likeness. There is an irreducibly *qualitative* element in the notion of approximation, i.e. the respects in and degrees to which one description may be said to approximate another.<sup>31</sup>

Nonetheless, Psillos argues, the notion of truthlikeness is quite clear; a concept need not be formalized to be so. On what he calls his “intuitive approach” to truthlikeness, truthlikeness can be generally described as follows:

If truth is understood as *fittingness*, that is, if it accepted [sic] that a theory (or theoretical description) is true if and only if it fits the world, then truthlikeness should be understood as *approximate fittingness*: a description, statement, law, theory are truth-like if and only if there are respects and degrees to which they fit with the facts.<sup>32</sup>

Following Brink or Psillos’ approach, the notion of truthlikeness can be preserved even if it turns out that none of the current theories of truthlikeness are successful. The idea is simply that theories can fail to fit the facts, but nonetheless have some close relation to the facts that is informative. Newton’s physics, albeit flawed, is such a close fit to the truth that it has enabled science to make accurate predictions. Simply put, false theories can be truthlike. This fact is of great importance when it comes to evaluating theories themselves. In what follows, I will be evaluating a certain category of competing theories, i.e. religions. If truth and falsity are not all that matter, i.e. if *truthlikeness* is also important, a unique view of religious diversity can be identified. This is my aim.

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<sup>31</sup> Psillos, 278.

<sup>32</sup> Psillos, 276-7.

## PART TWO: CONSTRUCTING THE ARGUMENT

### CHAPTER 4:

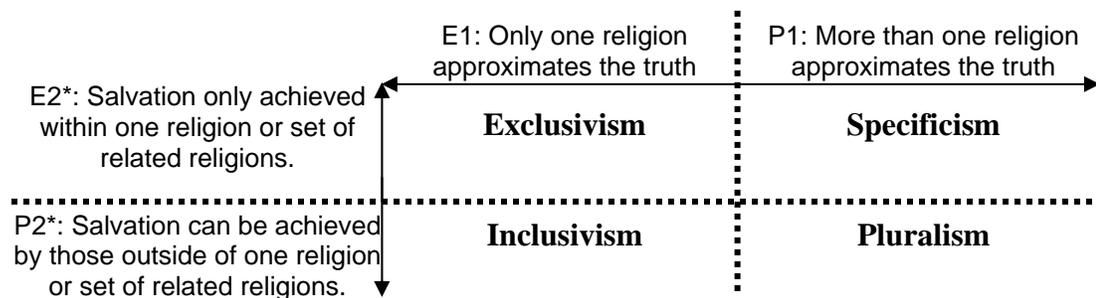
#### *Theories as Models of Reality*

In this, the second half of my project, I will argue directly for Critical Pluralism. Because the task of the remaining chapters is slightly different, it may help to recapitulate what I have argued for in Part One and identify what remains to be argued for in Part Two.

#### Summary

In Chapter 1, I provided a sketch of the various possible responses to the problems of religious diversity. Depending on one's position regarding the number of true religions and one's position regarding the number of religions that are effective in one's achievement of salvation, each particularly *religious* response to religious diversity can be placed in one of four categories. Recall Figure 1.3:

**Fig 1.3 The Double Continuum Picture**



In Chapter 2, I offered some strong considerations against E2\*. For this reason, the scope of my project can be defined as finding the proper position in the bottom half of the horizontal continuum. Figure 4.1 sketches the remaining positions open to consideration.



CP4: Some major religions are substantially closer to the truth than *some* other major religions.

More loosely, the conjunction of these four claims is the view that some religions approximate the truth better than others while no religion is far and away superior in terms of truth. Although there are a number of possible ways to depict this view, the result may look something like that in Figure 4.2. In this depiction, each letter represents a different religious belief system and the closer a religious belief system is to the right, the closer it approximates the truth.

**Fig. 4.2: One Possible Depiction of Critical Pluralism**



While some religions are clearly closer to the truth than others, no one religion stands alone as the one true religion or as the clearly superior religion.

In the following chapters, I will provide a certain description of religious traditions that, I argue, is best explained by Critical Pluralism. Because I am appealing to the best explanation, the conclusion that Critical Pluralism is true follows with *probability*. It is the most plausible account of religious diversity, or so I will argue. My strategy will be as follows. CP1-CP4 are each negations of inclusivist and pluralist positions. CP1-CP3 each reject one of the corresponding inclusivist views:

I1: One religion is a full description of the truth.

I2: One religion *very closely* approximates the truth.

I3: One religion is substantially closer to the truth than *all* other religions.

Moreover, CP4 is a rejection of a pluralist position we can call “Egalitarian Pluralism:”

EP: No major religion is substantially closer to the truth than any other major religion.

In discussing each of these views, I will argue that CP1 is a better explanation of religious diversity than I1, CP2 is a better explanation than I2, and so on. Ultimately, I will have defended the thesis that Critical Pluralism is the best explanation of the diversity of religious truth claims.

### **Preliminaries**

The present chapter has the following two aims. First, it sketches a view of religions as imperfect attempts to model reality. This view of religions will be indispensable in arguing for the four theses of Critical Pluralism. The second aim of this chapter follows quickly from the first. Given this particular view of religions as imperfect models or theories of reality, it becomes obvious that I1 is false. To be more clear, the argument in this chapter is:

1. Religious belief systems are evolving theories that model reality in an approximate and partial way.
2. If premise 1 is true, it is not the case that one religion is a full description of the truth (I1 is false).
3. Therefore, it is not the case that one religion is a full description of the truth.

The task of arguing for CP2-CP4 will be left for later chapters. Nonetheless, the foundation for those arguments depends upon premise 1 in the above argument. For this reason, I will devote a good deal of time to defending this claim here.

It is necessary first to clarify a few terms and make some preliminary remarks. First, there is some ambiguity over what I mean by the terms ‘religion,’ ‘religious belief system,’ and ‘true religion.’ The term ‘religion’ itself is ambiguous in that it can mean a full religious tradition or a particular religious sect within that tradition. Within a religious tradition, Christianity for example, there are a variety of religious sects such as Protestantism and Catholicism. We find a similar division among other religious traditions. Within Islam, there are Shiites and Sunnis, Buddhists may be Theravada or Mahayana, etc. Within many of these sects there are further sects and sub-sects. Thus, when I speak of one religion or one religious belief system, it may be unclear to exactly what I am referring. I intend to sidestep this particular issue. My argument will not hinge on precisely how one specifies the meaning of the term ‘religion.’ Whether, by ‘religion,’ one refers to the large religious traditions as a whole, e.g. Christianity, or merely a small sub-sect of that tradition, e.g. Seventh-Day Adventists, the conclusion of this chapter will hold nonetheless: it is not the case that one religion is a full description of the truth.

Even so, it is not quite clear what a religious belief system is. Even if we specify what tradition or sect we are speaking of, there still may not be a distinct set of beliefs that all or most members of a religion hold.<sup>1</sup> Religious belief systems are not clear-cut blocks of doctrine that can be compared in truth-value to other blocks of doctrine as sets of propositions can. Religious belief systems are amorphous, constantly evolving sets of beliefs. For the sake of this work, I will use the term in the following, admittedly vague, way:

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<sup>1</sup> Likewise, there is not a precise set of “members” of most religions.

Religious belief systems = (df.) sets of beliefs that members of religions hold in virtue of being members of that religion.<sup>2</sup>

It should also be noted that religious belief systems include beliefs about a variety of issues, metaphysical, ethical, political and so on. I will be focusing on the *metaphysical* claims of a religious belief system unless specified otherwise. By ‘metaphysical’ I mean any claim that intends to describe, “how things are” in a very loose sense.

I should also note here that I am trying to give an account of religious diversity *in the actual world*. For this reason, I am concerned with religions that actually exist rather than hypothetical religions that could be “created” at whim. For example, one may create a religion that only makes the claim; “there is some divine being.” If such a religion existed, it may not fit my description of religions as partial and approximate models of reality. My thesis, however, ought to be interpreted as applying to existing religions, and typically, to the major religions of the world, not to any hypothetical religion.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, in what follows I will rely heavily on an analogy between religious belief systems and scientific theories. Clearly, science is different than religion in a number of ways. For one, the domain and methods of each type of theory is different. Science investigates the natural world while religious inquiries typically involve appeal to the supernatural. One could also point to the variety of methodological and sociological differences between the two. Nonetheless, there are a number of striking similarities that are helpful for constructing a view of religious belief systems. I will

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<sup>2</sup> I will use the terms ‘religious belief system’ and ‘religious theory’ interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> Limiting the scope of my project in this way has the added benefit of avoiding the notoriously difficult task of having to define the word ‘religion.’ While it is not clear whether the one-proposition religion mentioned above is a religion, almost every existing “religion candidate” is clearly a religion. There may certainly be cases, Confucianism for instance, where it is unclear whether it is a religion or not. As this difficulty is inessential to my thesis, I do not take a stand on this issue.

argue that both types of theories present reality-depicting models that are often revised, updated, and occasionally revolutionized, that they both attempt to explain the hidden and often unobservable features of reality, and finally that they both provide partial and approximate representations of reality. On my view, theories ought to be understood as evolving, provisional accounts that approximate truth rather than literally true descriptions. In other words, one ought to eschew a naïve realism for what may be called a more “critical” realism.

Finally, I would like to apply the machinery of truthlikeness from the previous chapter to evaluate religious belief systems. Belief systems are changing and vague sets of beliefs. Thus, it would be inappropriate to judge whether or not a religious belief system is true based simply upon whether or not all of its component beliefs are true. Rather, I will speak of religious belief systems as being approximately true when they closely model reality.

### **Religious Belief Systems are Evolving Theories**

Premise 1, that religious belief systems are evolving theories that model reality in an approximate and partial way, can be broken into two sub-claims. First, religious belief systems are *theories* that *evolve over time*. Second, religious belief systems model reality in an *approximate and partial* way.

In what way is a religious belief system a theory? By a ‘theory’ I simply mean a set of claims purported to explain some set of phenomena. If we use this definition, clearly religious belief systems are theories. Religious belief systems may include theoretical claims about the existence of the Divine, its relation to the world, or some

account of the goal of mankind and how it ought to be achieved. Ultimately, religious belief systems provide explanations of some set of phenomena and so they can rightly be called theories.

Because one way of explaining a set of phenomena is by *modeling* it, theories often take the form of models or include models. A model is not a description or explanation of some phenomena but a *representation* of that phenomena or some aspect of that phenomena. Janet Soskice defines ‘model’ along these lines:

An object or state of affairs is a model when it is viewed in terms of its resemblance, real or hypothetical, to some other object or state of affairs; a miniature train is a model of the full-scale one, a jam jar full of cigarette ends is seen as a model for the lungs of a smoker, the behaviour of water is seen as a model for the action of electricity.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly science and religion provide a great deal in the way of theory. They propose numerous descriptions of how things are: “atoms are composed of certain subatomic particles,” “God is all-powerful,” and so on. Both science and religion, however, also propose many *models* of reality. The Copernican solar system provides a model of the rotation of the planets that opposes the Ptolemaic model. Moreover, religions are rife with models of religious reality. The early Christian Church for example was caught in a debate regarding the divine identity of Christ. On this question, there were quite a variety of models. The Docetists argued that Christ appeared human, but was fully divine.<sup>5</sup> The Nestorians claimed that Christ was two distinct persons, one God and one man.<sup>6</sup> Others, such as the Apollinarians, claimed that Christ was divine but merely had a human

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<sup>4</sup> Janet Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 101.

<sup>5</sup> Linwood Urban, *A Short History of Christian Thought*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 75.

<sup>6</sup> Urban, 84-6.

“shell.”<sup>7</sup> Of all the accounts in this marketplace of models, the Orthodox Christian view embraced by the Church was that Christ had two distinct natures, God and man, but was only one person.<sup>8</sup> Each of these views provides a different Christological model much in the same way that the Copernican and Ptolemaic models of the solar system represent planetary motion in a different way.

If religions are theories that model reality, how do they evolve? One way to understand the evolution of theories is to examine Imre Lakatos’ work in *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*.<sup>9</sup> I have chosen to discuss Lakatos’ account of scientific theories, not because it is necessarily the most plausible account of scientific research. There is neither the room nor the need to pursue that question here. Rather, I use Lakatos’ account simply because it provides a plausible *realist* interpretation of science that is widely discussed.

Lakatos distinguishes between the “hard core” and the “protective belt”<sup>10</sup> of a scientific research program.<sup>11</sup> The primary distinction between the hard core and the protective belt is that the hard core of a research program is not typically challenged. The hard core represents the central claims of a theory that are assumed to be true for the sake of future research. In order to preserve this hard core, however, a research program

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<sup>7</sup> Urban, 83-4.

<sup>8</sup> Urban, 88.

<sup>9</sup> Imre Lakatos, *Philosophical Papers [of] Imre Lakatos*, eds. John Worrall and Gregory Currie, vol. 1, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Lakatos, 48.

<sup>11</sup> Lakatos speaks of “research programs” rather than theories because his interest is in what accounts for scientific progress. He defines a research program as a “developing series of theories” that has a certain structure. Lakatos, 179.

constructs a protective belt of provisional claims that is capable of adjusting and adapting to various problems:

All scientific research programmes may be characterized by their ‘*hard core*.’ The negative heuristic of the programme forbids us to direct the *modus tollens* at this ‘hard core.’ Instead, we must use our ingenuity to articulate or even invent ‘auxiliary hypotheses,’ which form a *protective belt* around this core, and we must redirect the *modus tollens* to these.<sup>12</sup>

According to the way research programs typically work, one cannot falsify (i.e. apply *modus tollens* to) the hard core. Instead, one must try to protect that hard core with a variety of peripheral claims that predict new phenomena or explain observed phenomena in terms of the hard core.

An example would be helpful here. According to Lakatos, the three laws of motion and the law of gravitation comprised the hard core of Newton’s physics.<sup>13</sup> By itself this core is not very helpful in predicting phenomena or dealing with possible anomalies. For this reason, the auxiliary hypotheses of the protective belt are necessary. In the case of Newton, Lakatos identifies geometrical optics and Newton’s theory of atmospheric refraction as aspects of the protective belt.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note, however, that the constituents of the protective belt are not constant. For Lakatos, a research program involves a *series* of theories that succeed one another. If Newton’s theory of atmospheric refraction created certain anomalies, it would be abandoned in order to better protect the hard core. The “research program” would continue although the theory would change.

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<sup>12</sup> Lakatos, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Lakatos, 179.

<sup>14</sup> Lakatos, 179.

Using this model, Lakatos provides a realist account of scientific change and progress. Contrary to relativist and sociological accounts of scientific change such as Thomas Kuhn's,<sup>15</sup> Lakatos gives an objective and realist account of scientific progress. Anomalies arise when inconsistencies show up between the hard core of a theory and its protective belt or between the belt and the facts of experimentation. When these are identified, scientists are forced to "apply modus tollens" to the protective belt. But these changes are not unexpected. The protective belt is merely provisional, useful if it serves its purpose and easily disposed of if it does not. The goal, remember, is to preserve the hard core. Eventually, the hard core itself may need to be abandoned, but only as a last resort, when it fails to anticipate any novel facts.<sup>16</sup>

Research programs include, in addition to their hard cores and protective belts, both a positive and negative heuristic. These are "methodological rules" for proceeding with the research program.<sup>17</sup> The positive heuristic indicates what one should pursue, the negative heuristic what one should avoid.<sup>18</sup> While the negative heuristic directs one away from refuting the hard core, the positive heuristic is a "partially articulated set of suggestions" for constructing and modifying the protective belt in view of current and future anomalies.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Lakatos, 49.

<sup>17</sup> Lakatos, 47.

<sup>18</sup> Lakatos, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Lakatos, 50.

The positive heuristic of the programme saves the scientist from becoming confused by the ocean of anomalies. The positive heuristic sets out a programme which lists a chain of even more complicated *models* simulating reality...<sup>20</sup>

According to Lakatos, Newton experimented with many different models of planetary motion, some before and some after his publication of *Principia*. As one can see, the progression of models used by Newton demonstrate the function of the positive heuristic:

Newton first worked out his programme for a planetary system with a fixed point-like sun and one single point-like planet. It was in this model that he derived his inverse square law for Kepler's ellipse. But this model was forbidden by Newton's own third law of dynamics, therefore the model had to be replaced by one in which both sun and planet revolved round their common centre of gravity... Then he worked out the programme for more planets as if there were only heliocentric but no interplanetary forces. Then he worked out the case where the sun and planets were not mass-points but mass-*balls*... Having solved this 'puzzle,' he started work on *spinning balls* and their wobbles. Then he admitted interplanetary forces and started work on *perturbations*.... ...[later] he started work on *bulging* planets, rather than round planets, etc.<sup>21</sup>

As one can see, each of these successive models represents a step forward in complexity.

The goal of each model is to depict reality in terms of the hard core of the research program, but each step involves overcoming certain theoretical obstacles in order to more closely mirror the way things are. Note that these models as such are not part of the hard-core of the research program. Each model is provisional, in most cases admittedly so.<sup>22</sup>

When further anomalies arise, one may be forced to abandon one's model in favor of a new and revised one. This is precisely what the positive heuristic is meant to do.

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<sup>20</sup> Lakatos, 50.

<sup>21</sup> Lakatos, 50.

<sup>22</sup> For example, it is safe to assume that Newton never believed that planets and the sun were actually "mass points."

Although Lakatos may provide an accurate account of *scientific* theories, what reason do we have for thinking that religious belief systems are anything like scientific theories? More specifically, what reason do we have for thinking that religious theories and models evolve? Instead of thinking of religions as static and discrete theories making their own claims about reality, however, it is helpful to think of a religious belief systems as a *series* of theories. What 1st century Christians believed, for instance, is a great deal different than what modern day Christians believe.<sup>23</sup> There is no distinct “Christian belief system” that has been passed down unchanged from the time of Christ. It simply cannot be denied that religious thought evolves over time.

Moreover, it seems that religious belief systems, like scientific theories, have both core beliefs and more provisional beliefs that arise to protect this belt as well. For instance, the belief that God exists is certainly at the core of Christianity. But there are other beliefs once thought essential to Christianity that have been discarded by some who call themselves Christians. The literal inerrancy of the Bible, for instance, once was an indispensable core belief for Christians and still is for many. Nonetheless, it is a claim that has been discarded by many other Christians. If we are to see religious traditions as series of theories, we can admit that core beliefs can change when one theory is discarded in favor of a new one.

When belief systems are not being fully revolutionized, they still undergo an evolution in terms of the auxiliary beliefs of the “protective belt.” As religious thought evolves, new auxiliary beliefs are added, others are removed, and still others are revised. One may wonder what causes theories to evolve in the case of religious theories. In the

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<sup>23</sup> Keith Ward, *A Vision to Pursue: Beyond the Crisis in Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 134-61.

sciences, change typically occurs when auxiliary claims of the protective belt are altered in order to account for anomalies with experimental data. Although religions do not engage in experiments, religious belief systems, like scientific theories, evolve in order to *respond to changing evidence*. A religious belief system that was incompatible with its members' religious experiences, for example, would be rejected by its members. Moreover, religious theories evolve in order to respond to changes in sacred texts, inspired teachings, testimony, philosophical and theological debate, and occasionally scientific developments.

Janet Soskice argues that religious models evolve by responding to evidence in much the same way that scientific models do. Rather than pretend that religious truth is handed down once and for all in a definitive revelation, she argues that understanding theological truths is an historical process:

But it is not necessary to believe that, at one moment in the history of Israel, the model of God as spirit was given, by cosmic disclosure, in a fully elaborated state and immediately embraced by everyone. It is more likely that this was one of many stumbling approximations used to articulate experiences judged to be of God... In this way, over time, there comes into being a rich assortment of models whose sources may be unknown but which have been gradually selected out by the faithful as being especially adequate to their experience.<sup>24</sup>

Models slowly alter throughout time to mirror the experiences of those who make use of them. This is not unlike what takes place in science. In the scientific case, people create models to represent the findings of empirical study. As one gathers more observations, one tinkers with and ultimately revises one's models. It seems that a similar thing happens in the evolution of religious thought.

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<sup>24</sup> Soskice, 153.

One example of religious views evolving in response to changes in evidence corresponds with our earlier discussion of the various models of Christ's divinity. The Orthodox view that Christ is two natures in one person is not a view that has been professed by the Church since the first days of Christianity. Rather, it was a view that came about due to a long period of evolution. During this period, the theory tried to adapt to the evidence in Scripture and testimony in addition to the merit of theological arguments. It was not until the First Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. when the Church first declared that Christ was fully God.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. was the first to actually promulgate the Orthodox view that Christ is one person with two natures.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the Third Council of Constantinople in 680-1 C.E. made a further alteration on this view, declaring that Christ had two separate wills in addition to his two natures.<sup>27</sup> Although the official announcements of the councils are not the only, or even the best, way to determine what Christians believed at a given time, they certainly point to an evolution in thought. Indeed, this evolution is a slow process that takes place over the course of hundreds of years.

Keith Ward agrees that religious models evolve over time. Primarily focusing on Christianity, he identifies three major shifts in the history of religious thought: the rise of the natural sciences, the awareness of history, and the emphasis on critical thinking.<sup>28</sup> At

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<sup>25</sup> Father Clement Raab, *The Twenty Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church* (London: Longmans, Green, and co., 1937), 5-7.

<sup>26</sup> Raab, 30-1.

<sup>27</sup> Raab, 41-6.

<sup>28</sup> Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 135.

each major shift, Christian believers were forced to modify some of Christian doctrine.<sup>29</sup> First, after Newton and Darwin, God's role in the universe appeared to be smaller in the Christian mind.<sup>30</sup> Instead of creating the world as it is out of nothing, after the rise of science God is reduced to the role of the initiator of the evolutionary process and the physical laws of the universe that then produce the universe we live in. After the second shift in thought, the awareness of progress in history, Ward argues, Christians became less willing to assume that what was believed in the past must be correct.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, given the progress of science, people became more apt to think that past beliefs are false and future progress will lead to the truth. Moreover, people became less inclined to find their own culture's conception of the divine as authoritative given the awareness of the great differences between cultures.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the third shift, that of critical thinking, has changed the way Christians look at scripture and tradition.<sup>33</sup> The idea that all texts need to be analyzed has changed the way people think of scripture. For many, the Bible is an inspired compilation of religious texts rather than the literal and final word on all matters. While a literal interpretation of the Bible as the final word of God may have been part of most forms of Christianity in the past, many Christian sects have since modified this stance. Passages in scripture that were once read quite literally, such as the creation story, are now

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<sup>29</sup> Because Ward does not use Lakatos' terminology, it is unclear whether these shifts constitute revolutionary "core changing" shifts or simply large modifications of auxiliary beliefs. I would argue that these three shifts involve a mix of both types of theory evolution.

<sup>30</sup> Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 134-50.

<sup>31</sup> Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 150-3.

<sup>32</sup> Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 152.

<sup>33</sup> Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 153-61.

interpreted metaphorically. Given the dramatic changes in religious thought Ward cites, it is certainly a mistake to view religious belief systems as static unchanging bodies of belief about what reality is like.

Moreover, it is a mistake to think that the evolution of religious belief systems is already completed and will not evolve in the future. Given the uncontroversial fact the scientific theories have evolved and changed in the past, and the fact that there is no reason to think that scientific theories are finished evolving, we can make the induction that scientific theories will continue to change and evolve in the future. Can we also make the parallel argument regarding the evolution of *religious* theories? Religious belief systems, like scientific theories, have changed and evolved over time. There is also no reason to think that religious belief systems are finished evolving. Thus, we can also make the induction that religious belief systems will continue to change and evolve in the future. I will refer to this as the *Theory Evolution Argument*. Religious belief systems are series of belief systems that have evolved and changed in the past and will continue to evolve and change in the future.

### **Religious Belief Systems are Approximate Models**

That religious belief systems act like theories that change over time is not a very controversial claim. My second and more ambitious claim, however, is that religious belief systems are theories that *approximately and partially* model reality. One argument for this thesis is similar to the Theory Evolution Argument above. Let us call it the *Theory Approximation Argument*. Scientific theories in the past have been approximate

and partial. There is no reason to think that today's theories are unlike past theories in this respect. Therefore, most likely today's theories are approximate and partial.

We can make a similar argument concerning religious belief systems:

1. Religious theories of the past have been approximate and partial.
2. There is no reason to think that today's religious theories are unlike past theories in this respect.
3. Therefore, most likely today's religious theories are approximate and partial.

Indeed, the very fact that religious models constantly evolve seems to indicate that they have been approximate and partial in the past. The declaration that Christ was fully God at the First Council of Nicaea, although perhaps true, was only "approximately true." It did not spell out the various details later declared in other councils.<sup>34</sup> At each step of the evolution of Christianity, one could imagine, the religious theory approximates the truth more and more closely. If this were the case, however, it would also follow that at each previous stage, the religious theory was merely approximate. And, since we have no reason to think a religious theory is finished evolving at any given point in time, we also have no reason to think a religious theory is no longer approximately true (and, thus, a full description of the truth) at any given point in time.

Indeed, we have a number of reasons to think otherwise. First, it seems that no matter how many times a theory is revised, there will always be some features of reality that it fails to explain. The truth of this claim will become more clear when I discuss the

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<sup>34</sup> Recall Oddie and Tichy's theory of truthlikeness from Chapter 3. On their account, approximate truth is understood as closeness to the "whole truth" in a certain domain. I may describe an alleged criminal as 6 feet tall and white. Even if these two claims are true, my description is further from the truth than another description that also correctly includes his clothing and eye-color. In this way, an account may approximate the truth to a greater degree by adding more truths to it.

evolution of the atom model later in this section. Second, if Lakatos is correct, for any theory there are always anomalies that need to be taken into consideration and one's models must be further refined to accommodate them.<sup>35</sup> Lastly, one can infer from the history of discarded models in science that one's current models are most likely inadequate as well.

A further reason to think that religious belief systems and scientific theories are approximate and partial is found in our very definition of models. Recall Soskice's definition of a model:

An object or state of affairs is a model when it is viewed in terms of its resemblance, real or hypothetical, to some other object or state of affairs.<sup>36</sup>

One can use billiard balls to model the actions of particles or computers to model the system of the human brain. Keep in mind, however, that models are approximate *by their very nature*. In order to say that one object or state of affairs is *like* another one, one points to certain similarities between disparate things. Model trains, for example, are models of actual trains. A computer may be *like* the human brain in some ways, but it is not the same thing. Unless the items in questions are identical, any similarity will be similarity to *some degree*. For example, although the movements of billiard balls may provide a model for the interactions of particles, one's model must be modified when particles are observed to act in ways billiard balls do not. As one can see in the progression of Newton's models of planetary motion discussed in the previous section, quite a bit of qualification may be necessary to mirror reality. One may start with a rather simplistic model, as Newton did with the model of a point-like sun and a point-like

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<sup>35</sup> Lakatos, 49.

<sup>36</sup> Soskice, 101.

planet, and proceed to add complexity after complexity when inconsistencies between reality and the model arise. In this way, models are provisional tools used to model complex phenomena.

### *Approximate Modeling in Science*

There is evidence, then, that scientific theories themselves provide imperfect and partial models of reality. Like religion, science attempts to explain the hidden and often unobservable aspects of reality. While the physical world is observable for the most part, science attempts to explain what is not readily apparent. Newton, for example, did not claim that objects fall to the earth. This is an observable fact that is obvious to anyone. Newton's innovation is his *explanation* of gravitation. He explained the *hidden* force behind common observations. In the same way, physicists who study subatomic particles and those that study the origin of galaxies attempt to explain those features of the universe that are veiled from everyday experience. In order to do this, science makes use of models that may not be literally true, but which depict reality in an approximate way. Subatomic particles are not billiard balls, but act like them in some ways in some circumstances. Models are used in science to make the mysterious partially intelligible.

One particularly well-known case of approximate modeling in science is the evolution of the model of the atom. For years, the atom was thought to be solid and homogenous. Let us call this view the "original model" of the atom. J.J. Thompson first discovered subatomic particles and proposed the first modern model of the atom, the

“plum pudding” model, in 1904.<sup>37</sup> According to this model, negative particles more or less float around in a positively charged substance. This model was shown to be inadequate by Ernest Rutherford in 1911 when his associates projected particles at a piece of gold foil and found the particles to deflect in unexpected ways. He concluded that that atom was mostly empty space and that the positive charge was concentrated rather than spread out evenly.<sup>38</sup> He proposed what has become the well known “solar system model” of the atom. In this model, negative electrons orbit around a dense positively charged nucleus.<sup>39</sup>

The more complex “Bohr Model” displaced Rutherford’s model in 1913.<sup>40</sup> Named after Niels Bohr, this model also has a dense nucleus, but depicts electron orbits at different levels, or quanta, and introduces the insight of quantum mechanics that is not represented in any of the previous theories.<sup>41</sup> But even this refined third model is not sufficient for mirroring the inner workings of the atom. Later refinements of Bohr’s model attempted to make the model more accurate.<sup>42</sup> Even so, there are some inadequacies of these later refinements. In 1926 Erwin Schroedinger showed that electrons do not orbit in a planetary way. Rather, electrons exist in “probability clouds,” where the most one can say is that an electron is most likely in a particular “cloud” at any

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<sup>37</sup> M.K. Sundaesan, *Handbook of Particle Physics*. (Boca Raton, Fla.: CRC Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>38</sup> Sundaesan, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Sundaesan, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Sundaesan, 5

<sup>41</sup> Sundaesan, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Sundaesan, 7.

given time.<sup>43</sup> Since this time, the model has been revised by the discovery of dozens of subatomic particles such as the quark, gluon, and positron.<sup>44</sup>

Hardly any physicist would claim that the current model of the atom definitively and fully depicts the structure of the atom. Given the long evolution of modeling the atom, it would be arrogant to think that today's current model is the correct one, that after years of tinkering, scientists have finally found out what atoms are truly like. We can say with very little trepidation that the current model will change in the future.

According to scientific realism, this evolution represents a steady march of closer approximation to the truth.<sup>45</sup> The goal of scientific theory is to give an account of what the world is like. Although scientific models are not perfect mirrors of the world, they can provide highly informative and predictive models that seem to closely resemble that reality. That is, even if scientific models are partial and tentative, they are still useful and informative.

At this point, I would like to demonstrate how a theory might approximate the truth using the evolution of the atom model as an example. Using the most plausible theory of truthlikeness from the previous chapter, that of Tichy and Oddie, we can calculate the degree to which theory  $a$  approximates the truth  $t$  by finding, "the arithmetical mean of the distances between the true constituent  $t$  and the constituents

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<sup>43</sup> John S. Rigden, *Hydrogen: The Essential Element* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 74-86.

<sup>44</sup> Sundaesan, 11-49.

<sup>45</sup> Stathis Psillos, for instance, holds this view. Of course, it is a position heavily contested by antirealists. For a rigorous defense of antirealism, see Bas van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

appearing in the disjunctive normal form of  $a$ .”<sup>46</sup> To put it more simply, one determines how many of the basic sentences, or constituents, of a theory are true and how many are false. For example, if it is hot, rainy, and windy and my theory says that it is hot, rainy, and *not* windy, the distance my theory is from the truth is 1/3. My theory is correct on 2/3 of the matter and false on 1/3. It only lacks one out of three basic constituents that are true. In more complex matters, one ought to weigh each of the basic predicates differently depending on the importance of each. As mentioned in the previous chapter, when describing a criminal for a police sketch artist, a description is more accurate if it describes the criminal’s gender or size correctly than if it correctly describes the style of shoes or socks the criminal was wearing. Some features simply are more important than others. Thus, one ought to factor in the weights of the various components of “the truth” when measuring the distance one’s theory is from it.

In order to tell if a given theory is true or close to the truth, one first must know what the truth is. Because we are not omnipotent, let us assume that the Schroedinger model of the atom is fully correct. Although I have claimed that this is most likely not the case, let us assume it is merely for the sake of this demonstration. Furthermore, the current model of the atom is extremely complex. To fully measure the truthlikeness of the various models, one would have to analyze a very large number of basic sentences and determine their truth-values. For simplicity, then, let us deal with an extremely reduced number of basic sentences and focus only on the truthlikeness of one aspect of atomic models: their various accounts of electrons. In order to measure the truthlikeness of the full theory, of course, one would have to calculate the truthlikeness for each aspect

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<sup>46</sup> Pavel Tichy, “On Popper’s Definitions of Verisimilitude,” 159.

of the model. Regarding electrons, let us assume that there are four “basic sentences” that describe the truth,  $t$ , in this case:

T1: Electrons are negatively charged particles that exist throughout the atom.

T2: Electrons orbit the outer part of the atom, but not the center.

T3: Electrons are separated on different levels, or quanta, of the atom.

T4: Electrons exist in “probability clouds” where they are most likely to be at any given time.

If we assume that the current model is correct and that each of these four constituents are all about equal in weight, one can see that the evolution of the atom model represents a steady progress toward the truth. The Thompson “plum pudding” model is correct insofar as T1 is true, although a number of other claims are false. The Rutherford model is true insofar as it includes T1 and T2, but false in some of its other claims. The Bohr model goes further to include T3 in addition to T1 and T2 and contains less falsity. Finally, we have assumed that the Schroedinger model has all four components correct and is thus a complete description of the truth. Following this method, then, we could place these four theories in the order presented in terms of distance from the truth.

Certainly a number of objections could be raised against the methodology of this exercise. One might argue that the results have been gerrymandered to come out in a favorable way or that T1-T4 do not represent the “true” basic sentences that would describe each of these models. While each of these is a legitimate concern, I would like to point out simply that this is a *purposely simplified* account of the truthlikeness of these models. To fully account for the distance each theory is from the truth would require accounting for an innumerable amount of basic sentences and their truth-values as well as giving each of these basic sentences their proper weight. Given the complexity of each of

these models, one cannot realistically hope for an accurate measure of truthlikeness. This is not to say, however, that truthlikeness comparisons are hopeless. I think my simplified account does demonstrate the intuitive conclusion that each of these models is a further approximation of the truth. Just as one could place a large number of drawings of the human body from a stick figure to a masterful work of art in order of truthlikeness, each model of the atom can be arranged in a similar order. In order to put one model or theory closer to the truth than another, one picks out some complexity, some basic sentence, that is true in one but not in the other. Given highly complex systems such as an atomic model or a drawing of a human body, the precise basic sentence that makes one system closer to the truth than another is often difficult to find. Although we could have easily chosen different “basic sentences” in order to run the exercise, there is still an intuitive sense in which these models become progressively closer to the truth in a way similar to how I have sketched it.

### *Approximate Modeling in Religion*

Turning now to religious belief systems, my claim is that these also provide imperfect models of hidden aspects of reality. Like the atomic physicist, the theologian attempts to give an account of a largely mysterious matter. Just as the precise structure of the smallest pieces of matter is hidden, the nature of the divine and its relation to the world is largely inaccessible to the human mind. In order to arrive at this “special” knowledge, religion appeals to unusual sources of knowledge: sacred texts, religious and mystical experience, prayer and the like. Because the divine is transcendent and divine knowledge is difficult to grasp, theology makes use of metaphors and models to grasp the

ungraspable. Some Christian theologians speak of God as “loving father” or as “vengeful judge.” Although there are some ways in which God is a loving father and some in which he is a vengeful judge, neither model is entirely correct. For example, God is not like a father in all ways. For instance, there is no corresponding “mother.”<sup>47</sup> Even if we were to make the model more specific by qualifying it in various ways, it would be hard to imagine that our model will perfectly match reality. The inaccessibility of God’s nature, like the structure of subatomic physics, is such that a perfectly accurate description is an unrealistic hope. It should come as no surprise, then, that the theories constructed in both religion and science are approximate at best.

If the evolution of scientific theories can be charted on a continuum of truthlikeness, it seems that a similar thing can be done with the evolution of religious belief systems. Just as I have purposely simplified the account of truthlikeness in the case of the Atom Model, I will simplify an example in the religious case as well. Again, because we are not omnipotent, let us suppose, simply for the sake of demonstration, that the model of Christ updated in the Third Council of Constantinople is the correct one, namely that Christ is divine, that he has two natures but is one person, and that he has two wills. We could break this into three primitive sentences:

- C1: Christ is divine.
- C2: Christ has two natures in one person.
- C3: Christ has two wills.

Let us also suppose that these are all weighted equally. Other more peripheral claims regarding Christ’s divinity may be part of the Christian belief system as well, but let us suppose that they are weighted much less than these claims and so can be ignored for

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<sup>47</sup> Soskice, 116.

these purposes. Although this is an oversimplified account of the evolution of only one aspect of Christian thought, I merely aim to show that religions imperfectly approximate the truth in a way similar to the way I describe it.

If C1-C3 fully describes the truth,  $t$ , Christianity has not held these doctrines from the beginning. As I have discussed, it took much debate in Christianity's infancy to determine that Jesus had two natures in one person. As I have also noted, there were a variety of competing models of Christ's divinity including Nestorianism, Apollinarianism, and the like. If we suppose that the Orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation is correct, it would be a truth that Christianity "discovered" later in its history. Thus, in our very simplified account of the evolution of Christian thought, religious thought evolve as it approximates the truth to a greater degree. If we assume that C1-C3 exhaustively detail the truths in our domain, it follows that at any stage before the Third Council of Constantinople, *the religious belief system was approximate and partial*. Just as J.J. Thompson's plum pudding model is a distant approximation of the truth, the religious belief system that includes only C1 is merely partially true. Thus, on our assumptions, the religious belief system that includes C1-C3, like the Schrodinger model of the atom, is fully true while all of the earlier theories in the progression are only partially true.

Recall, however, that we simply assumed for the sake of the demonstration *that the final theory in each case is true*. When we remove this assumption, however, we notice two things. First, there is simply no reason to suppose that the current scientific theories or religious belief systems are finished evolving. At any point in history, one may think that the theory is complete. But time and again that notion turns out to be

incorrect. Just as all of the previous models of the atom have been revised or fully overhauled, one has reason to believe that the current model will also be revised and perhaps completely overhauled. Thus, we have strong inductive evidence to suppose that our current theories, scientific or religious, are at best partial and approximate theories as well. This is what the Theory Approximation Argument shows. Second, removing the assumption that our current religious or scientific theories are true removes with it the assumption that theories are constantly evolving *toward truth*. It may be, rather, that these theories are moving away from truth.<sup>48</sup> This, however, does not change the fact that these theories are partial and approximate. Whether they are moving closer to the truth or further from the truth, they are almost certainly not full descriptions of the truth.<sup>49</sup> It appears, then, that both scientific theories and religious belief systems act in a similar fashion. Both model certain mysterious aspects of reality in a partial and approximate way.

### *A Questionable Analogy?*

A common objection here may be that religious theories are so dissimilar to scientific theories that the comparison between the two is weak. Some claim that models in religion rely on metaphor and speculation alone while scientific metaphors and models

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<sup>48</sup> In the previous chapter, I pointed out some reasons to think that this is not the case with scientific theories.

<sup>49</sup> If a theory were a complete description of the truth at some point in time, one would not expect it to be further revised and altered. And, if a complete description of the truth *was* revised, it seems that it merely coincided with the truth accidentally.

are empirically grounded in observation and careful research.<sup>50</sup> Science, on this view, makes use of models merely as a pedagogical tool to explain complex mathematical formulas.<sup>51</sup> In religion, on the other hand, models are the essential “formulas” themselves. Metaphors and models in science are an aid while those in religion are a crutch.

Where some see fit to draw a sharp distinction between these two types of models, Janet Soskice argues that the process of modeling God is very similar to the process of modeling physical reality in science. Rather than play a secondary and inferior role, she argues that metaphors and models are essential to both science and religion despite their vagueness. In fact, it is the vague and amorphous quality of metaphors that allows them to be flexible and revisable over time.<sup>52</sup> We find examples in both science and religion where terms are introduced in order to model a particular feature of reality and these terms evolve over time to represent something new. Concepts such as “atoms,” “gravity,” and “space” have modeled quite different things throughout the history of science. In religion, concepts such as “salvation,” “damnation,” “revelation” and “God” have undergone such a great deal of change throughout time that the current concepts bear little resemblance to their original analogues. Despite this change, however, models and metaphors are vital to a theory in that they “depict relations” between concepts that may not be depicted without the use of such modeling.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> According to Soskice, Ian Ramsey is one who holds this type of view. See Soskice, 112-3 and Ian Ramsey, *Models and Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

<sup>51</sup> Soskice, 108.

<sup>52</sup> Soskice, 133.

<sup>53</sup> Soskice, 133.

Models give some semantic sense to theoretical descriptions. For example, if we use a computer as a model of the brain:

A term like ‘neural programming’ is given semantic placement in terms of the model upon which it depends. Hence, the term (for instance, ‘neural programming’) relies on the associative network generated by its underlying model (that of the computer).<sup>54</sup>

According to J.J.C. Smart, theories without models are “dead” in that they lack explanatory and predictive powers.<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, metaphors are not some second-rate tool for those who do not have an empirical basis for their beliefs. Rather, metaphors are essential to theoretical conjecture, whether empirical or not.

On her view, religious belief systems are approximate and impartial *precisely because* we can only speak about the transcendent through the use of imperfect metaphors and models.<sup>56</sup> As I have pointed out above, both science and religion attempt to give an account of some hidden aspect of reality. According to Soskice, however, a theory can be “reality-depicting” although it may not give a complete description. Although metaphors are limited in that they only identify similarities between two things that may differ in other respects, they still depict reality in an approximate way. To say that a theory or a model is approximate, then, is not a flaw of the theory. Rather, it is an essential aspect of modeling those aspects of reality that are particularly inaccessible.

How is it that a theory can depict reality without properly describing it? In the case of God, metaphors and models are used to *refer* to God without describing him.

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<sup>54</sup> Soskice, 134.

<sup>55</sup> Soskice, 113-4.

<sup>56</sup> Soskice, 140.

This claim, in effect, is a rejection of description theories of reference. Description theories, such as that proposed by Bertrand Russell, assert that names are merely abbreviations for some type of description.<sup>57</sup> For this reason, reference can only take place if one's descriptions are accurate. On this view, if I were to believe that Socrates was a playwright because my only belief about him is that he wrote *Antigone*, it would turn out that I was not actually referring to Socrates. The description of Socrates as the man who wrote *Antigone* is not true of Socrates, but Sophocles.

There are a number of objections to the description theory of reference. For instance, it seems that one can refer to an individual despite having false beliefs about him.<sup>58</sup> I may be pointing to a man across the room and saying "That man with the toupee is Jones," although it may turn out that the man I am referring to actually does not have a toupee but merely a bad haircut. In fact, there may be another gentleman in that part of the room who does have a toupee, although I am not referring to him. In this case, reference is established in virtue of my causal relationship to Jones. In this way, one can *refer* despite being unable to accurately describe the object of reference.

If we reject descriptive theories of reference, there is a genuine possibility that an approximate model may depict reality without being literally correct. Once again, let us imagine that there are a number of witnesses to a crime in a dark alleyway. After interviewing the suspects, the witnesses may provide a number of descriptions of the criminal. Although none of these accounts may be entirely accurate, they all *depict*

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<sup>57</sup> William G. Lycan, *Philosophy of Language: A contemporary introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), 38-9.

<sup>58</sup> This objection was first raised in Keith Donnellan, "Reference and Definite Descriptions," *Philosophical Review* 75 (1966), 281-304.

*reality* in that they provide approximate accounts of some object based on an experience of that object. Clearly, the fact that one's description is not literally correct, suppose the criminal is 6-foot 2-inches rather than 6-foot 1-inch, does not imply that one's description does not successfully refer. Rather, two people may refer to the same thing despite having quite incompatible descriptions of that thing. Indeed, it would even be possible for members of two incompatible religions to refer to the same God despite the fact that their corresponding descriptions are not both true. As I will discuss in Chapter 6, this account of reference allows more than one religious belief system to approximate the truth despite being incompatible.

If we are to reject a description theory of reference and embrace some causal account, we can say that we refer to God through his effects. For instance, one may claim: "God is that which is the source of this particular religious experience," or "God is the source of everything that exists." It may be that one has very little idea *what kind of thing* is the source of this experience. One may know that this thing is very good or that it is something very unlike everything in the physical world. Nonetheless, a full description of what God actually is may be largely unknown. This is not uncommon in the sciences, however. Although one may know that an electron is that which has a negative charge and acts in this particular way, what an electron is *in itself*, apart from its effects, is largely unknown. Despite the lack of a complete and accurate description, however, one can still refer to and depict largely unknown entities in a partial and approximate way. As Soskice claims:

This is the fine edge at which negative theology and positive theology meet, for the apophatic insight that we say nothing of God, but only point towards Him, is the basis for the tentative and avowedly inadequate

stammerings by which we attempt to speak of God and His acts. And, as we have argued, this separation of referring and defining is at the very heart of metaphorical speaking and is what makes it not only possible but necessary that in our stammering after a transcendent God we must speak, for the most part, metaphorically or not at all.<sup>59</sup>

Soskice concludes that religious language is qualified and metaphorical, yet is grounded in experience.<sup>60</sup> Whether it is the mystical experience of Moses on Mount Sinai, the ordinary experience of the world on which we base our inference to a creator, or the experiences of those who wrote sacred texts, experiences ground the beliefs of the community. But these experiences, like those of the physicist trying to understand the structure of subatomic physics, only allow one to construct imperfect, revisable “stammerings” that model reality in an approximate way. If we have learned anything from the history of science and philosophy, it is that reality is an elusive prey. While we may pin it down here and there, there are always further puzzles and mysteries that require explanation. Nonetheless, the fact that religious claims are approximate does not mean that they are useless speculations. They may be the best attempt to describe a largely inaccessible domain that limited creatures can make.

### **Is One Religion a Full Description of the Truth?**

In the previous sections, I have argued (a) that religious belief systems are evolving theories that model reality, and (b) that these models are approximate and partial. If you recall, these two claims together compose premise 1 of the following, main argument of this chapter:

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<sup>59</sup> Soskice, 140.

<sup>60</sup> Soskice, 159.

1. Religious belief systems are evolving theories that model reality in an approximate and partial way.
2. If premise 1 is true, it is not the case that one religion is a full description of the truth (I1 is false).
3. Therefore, it is not the case that one religion is a full description of the truth.

If it is the case that religious belief systems only provide approximate and partial models of religious reality, it clearly follows that the most extreme form of inclusivism, I1 is false: no one religion is a complete description of the truth (about the religious domain). I have thus demonstrated that one of the four conjuncts comprising the Critical Pluralist thesis is true:

CP1: No one religion is a full description of the truth.

Surely, one may object that I1 is a straw man. Hardly anyone would be so arrogant as to think that his or her religious beliefs provide a complete description of religious truth. Indeed many firm believers in a particular religion hold that their religious belief system is the best religion although it is perhaps imperfect. Others claim that their religion is not a complete description of religious truth, but a *very* close approximation. Indeed, someone of this ilk may point out that if our best scientific theories are very close approximations at best, having a religious belief system that very closely approximates the truth is not a bad thing. In fact, given the acceptance and praise of science, a religion on par with these claims is very good indeed! In the next chapter, I aim to respond to each of these more moderate inclusivist positions in detail, demonstrating the truth of the second and third conjuncts of the Critical Pluralist thesis,

CP2 and CP3. Finally, in order to argue for CP4 in the final chapter, I will discuss a well-known pluralist view and critique it as well.

**CHAPTER 5:**  
*Inclusivism*

Is there one religion that is very close to the truth? Or, is there one that is a great deal better than all others? In the previous chapter, I refuted Strong Inclusivism (I1), the claim that one religion is a full description of the truth. Although the Strong Inclusivist position is a fairly extreme position, I will now turn my attention to the more moderate inclusivist positions suggested by the questions above. The goal of this chapter, then, is to argue against the following two inclusivist claims:

I2: One religion *very closely* approximates the truth.

I3: One religion is substantially closer to the truth than *all* other religions.

In doing so I will in effect argue for the second and third of the four theses of Critical Pluralism:

CP2: No one religion *very closely* approximates the truth.

CP3: No one religion is substantially closer to the truth than *all* other religions.

As I have noted earlier, the arguments I will supply for these claims are inductive. They appeal to what appears to be the best explanation of religious diversity. For this reason, the conclusions I draw follow with probability rather than necessity. To be more precise, then, I will argue in this chapter that CP2 is *more likely* than I2 and CP3 is *more likely* than I3.

Before doing so, however, I would like to clarify the meaning of CP2 and CP3. At first glance, these two claims are hopelessly vague. What does it mean to “very closely” approximate the truth? Although CP2 is not a precise thesis, we can appeal to

certain clear cases to help specify what it means. Newtonian physics, for example, is strictly speaking false. Nonetheless, it approximates the truth to such a degree that it can be used to send rockets into space. Likewise, a theory that is completely true other than the fact that it entails that the world population is 6,200,000 when in reality the world population is 6,200,004 is a clear example of a theory that is very close to the truth. In the later case, even if the population estimation were off by a few thousand, it would still be very close to the truth. Simply put, there are number of clear examples of theories in science that approximate the truth very closely. If religious theories closely resemble these theories, we may be confident that they approximate the truth very closely as well. I will provide a number of reasons for thinking that religious theories do not resemble theories that we have reason to believe approximate the truth very closely.

When I argue for the likelihood of CP3, on the other hand, one will naturally wonder what it means for one religion to be “significantly closer” to the truth than every other. What I mean here is simply that there will not be one religion that is so much closer to the truth than the others that it is the most rational to believe. The difference between the religion that is closest to the truth and the one that is second closest will not be such that it would be irrational to believe the second closest. Another way of putting this same notion is to say that the religion that is closest to the truth cannot be said to be a *real improvement* on the second. A theory T1 is a real improvement over another theory T2 when it provides clear epistemic benefits such that it would be rational to eschew T2 in favor of T1. As we will see in the next chapter, however, the fact that the religion that is closest to the truth is not a real improvement over the religion that is second closest

does not mean that there are not *some* religions that are real improvements over *some other* religions.

Having clarified my two theses, then, let us now turn to the arguments in favor of each. It may be helpful to note that the first thesis (CP2) is a claim about the distance each religion is from the truth. The second thesis (CP3) is a claim about the distance each religion is from the truth *in relation to one another*. In the following two sections, I will discuss each of these claims in turn.

### **Is One Religion Very Close to the Truth?**

My strategy in this section will be to present the arguments for and against I2, the claim that one religion approximates the truth very closely. I will first present the case in favor of I2 and then present the case against I2 (and in favor of CP2). After discussing these arguments and considering objections, it will become clear that it is more likely that CP2 rather than I2 is true.

#### *Apologetics*

The central evidence for the claim that a particular religion *very closely* approximates the truth (I2) typically takes the form of apologetic arguments. If apologetics ultimately fail, the proponent of I2 may still argue that some religion or other very closely approximates the truth but it is unclear from apologetic arguments which religion it is. I will address this claim (let us call it the Last Gasp Argument) when I present an argument for CP3. Ultimately, if apologetics and the Last Gasp Argument fail, it seems that we have no good reason to think that one religion very closely approximates the truth. This is not to

say, however, that no religion approximates the truth at all. It is simply that no religion does so *very closely*.

R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips provide a Christian apologetic argument that is quite standard in the literature.<sup>1</sup> Using a form of the Cosmological Argument, they maintain that we can reason to the existence of a personal God.<sup>2</sup> We also notice our lack of relationship with this personal God and have a desire to have one.<sup>3</sup> Given that relationships involve action from both members and that this God is benevolent, we can infer that it seems likely that God will reveal himself to us in some way.<sup>4</sup> They then argue that we ought to evaluate the evidence in favor of the revelation claims of various religions using the following three criteria:

(1) A revelation claim must be compatible with what is revealed about God independently of that particular revelation claim; (2) a revelation claim must embody a message suited to the human needs that prompt the expectation of a particular revelation in the first place; and, (3) a revelation claim must, when possible, be corroborated by external signs (i.e., miracles) in order to distinguish a genuine revelation from spurious revelation claims.<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, Christianity succeeds on their view on all three counts where other religions fail.

The truth of the good news is confirmed by historically well-attested miracles, especially the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

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<sup>1</sup> For a tiny sample of other Christian apologists, see also C.S. Lewis *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996); William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994); and Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics: Hundreds of Answers to Crucial Questions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 220-1.

<sup>3</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 224-5.

<sup>4</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 225.

<sup>5</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 226.

According to the best historical evidence, we have no less than four reliable accounts (namely, the Gospels of the New Testament) of the main events of the life of Jesus and of his self-understanding as God.<sup>6</sup>

Then, given that the Bible provides the type of special revelation that meets their criteria, they begin to cite Biblical evidence that supports the truth of the Christian faith and the doctrine that belief in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation.<sup>7</sup> In order to evaluate such an argument, one might examine the Cosmological Argument, the inference to revelation, and the various miracles and historical accounts of the life of Jesus Christ. This examination, we might hope, would verify the truth of the Christian story. Unfortunately, standard apologetic arguments of this sort are typically unsuccessful. Clearly, there is not room to evaluate all of the apologetic arguments offered for every religion. Nonetheless, we can notice that apologetic arguments typically fail for two main reasons.

The first reason apologetic arguments typically fail is the particularly knotty problem presented by the impenetrable fog of ancient history. A number of important doctrinal religious claims rest on historical facts that, to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are largely unknowable. Did Jesus truly rise from the dead? Did the angel Gabriel actually appear to Muhammad and dictate the Qu'ran? Did the Buddha truly achieve a higher state of knowledge through enlightenment? Did Yahweh really bestow the Ten Commandments to Moses? If the truth of many central religious claims rests on the answers to such ancient historical questions, our unfavorable epistemic situation toward history surely puts us in a poor position to ascertain the truth of these claims. According to Byrne, “we are not going to find evidence which we can use now to settle what took place thousands

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<sup>6</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 227.

<sup>7</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 229-39.

of years ago.”<sup>8</sup> Byrne appears to be correct on this matter. While Geivett and Phillips and others like them point to the “historical record” as evidence of the truth of Christianity, it is likely that apologists for Islam, Buddhism, and the like, also offer historical evidence in favor of their religious claims. Although it is certainly *possible* that one of these historical accounts is accurate, we are in no position to make a judgment on the matter. In other words, the neutral rational and reflective individual who is aware of the various apologetic arguments has very little objective grounds on which to judge the historical accuracy of these competing claims. It seems that the historical matters on which many religious claims depend have been lost to the depths of history. Although the historical record has the potential to provide universal reasons that could settle apologetic disputes, it appears to be too unreliable to do so.

The second reason apologetics typically fail is the existence of a number of competing apologetic arguments *with no independent basis by which to sort among them*. We find apologetic arguments parallel to Geivett and Phillips’ in the Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Jewish traditions.<sup>9</sup> Simply put, each religion provides arguments that mimic those put forth by Geivett and Phillips. They can cite traditional arguments, prophets, sacred writings, historical events, or mystical experiences that purport to show that their favored religion is true. Of course, the fact that each religion can provide parallel arguments for the truth of its claims does not itself show that no single set of arguments is

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Byrne, “It Is Not Reasonable to Believe that Only One Religion Is True,” in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 208.

<sup>9</sup> For an example of Buddhist apologetics, see F. Max-Muller, ed., *The Questions of King Milinda*, trans. T.W. Rhys Davids (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press Ltd., 2001). For an example of Hindu apologetics, see Richard Fox Young, *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (Leiden: Brill, 1981).

sound. Indeed, the proponents of each set of arguments believe that their arguments are superior to the arguments for competing positions. On Geivett and Phillips' view, for example, there is more evidence pointing toward the truth of Christianity than there is for the competing religions. What reason do we have for doubting that any set of apologetic arguments is superior?

While the plurality of apologetic arguments is not in itself a reason to doubt that any are superior, the radical failure of these arguments to persuade nonbelievers does provide reason to doubt their success. If it were the case that one religion had superior evidence of the truth of its religion *and this evidence was somehow universally accessible*, one would expect this evidence to convince large numbers of contrary thinkers. This is not what we find, however. Peter Byrne puts this well:

Forms of confessionalism [the view that one religion is normative] will contend that one normative tradition... can produce a dogmatic structure which is detailed and certain enough to be the means of interpreting religion as a whole. Its key concepts and claims perhaps sum up and complete the insights contained in other religions. Now we must put this question: if human beings are able to discover definitive truths about the transcendent, and if one tradition has such truths, why do not representatives of the other traditions recognise the definitive truths of the normative tradition on being confronted with them?<sup>10</sup>

In the case of mathematics, for example, the validity of proofs and discoveries of new theorems is apparent to mathematicians from all cultures. In the case of the natural sciences, new discoveries, although perhaps not persuasive to those from all worldviews, are typically accepted by the scientific community over time. For example, Galileo's discovery of the moons orbiting Jupiter were not enough to convince astronomers at the

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 19-20.

time that Ptolemaic astronomy was incorrect.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, over time the paradigm slowly shifted in a way that allowed these discoveries to be accepted. Although it would be a mistake to think that there is no disagreement in science, one does not find in science the sort of radical disagreement that cannot be resolved by a thorough analysis of the evidence over time that one finds in religion.

On my view, the reason we find such a difference between religion and fields like the sciences and mathematics is that in the latter group there are universal reasons to which one can appeal whereas in religion there are not. There are no *universally accessible* reasons, methods of interpretation, or systems of proof that allow one to sort true religions from false. By “universally accessible reasons,” I mean merely evidence that stands apart from a particular religious tradition. If there were universally accessible reasons to be a Christian, for example, then these reasons would carry epistemic weight for non-Christians as well as Christians. But as Byrne notes, these seem to be lacking in apologetics:

Of course, traditions are not slow in producing reasons which are meant to convince those of other faiths. Christianity has long appealed to Jews to accept that Christ fulfills the prophecies and claims about the Messiah contained in ancient Judaism. The problem, of course, is that such reasons seem to have little neutral weight and tend to be convincing only after conversion.<sup>12</sup>

If such arguments are only convincing *after* conversion, this could indicate that religious belief is the result of something non-rational. Or it may mean, as I have been arguing, that there is a lack of universal reasons favoring any particular religion. In either case,

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<sup>11</sup> Stillman Drake, introduction to *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, by Galileo Galilei (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), 73.

<sup>12</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 20.

however, it would be problematic for the inclusivist program if apologetic arguments are unconvincing to those from competing religions.

Examine, for example, the criteria Geivett and Phillips propose for sorting the authentic revelation from the inauthentic. On their account, the authentic revelation must be consistent with natural theology, provide a positive message that meets our human needs, and must be corroborated by miracles.<sup>13</sup> Of these only the first seems plausible *a priori* and is likely to meet with acceptance from non-Christians. Certainly a religion needs to be consistent with whatever we can infer by reason alone. But the further criteria that revelation must supply a positive message and be corroborated by miracles seem *ad hoc*. Certainly it would be nice for a religion to supply a positive message, and it would be hard for a religion to survive without one. It does not seem that evaluating religions in terms of *how* positive their messages are, as Geivett and Phillips seem to do,<sup>14</sup> is the best means of assessing truth. Finally, the demand for miracles does not seem to be warranted. I cannot think of an *a priori* connection between miracles and revelation. Like the second criterion, the requirement that miracles corroborate the true revelation seems more like an added bonus than a necessity.<sup>15</sup>

This highlights the problem presented by a lack of universal reasons in apologetics. Without such reasons, there is a lack of agreement concerning *what counts*

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<sup>13</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 227.

<sup>14</sup> See Geivett and Phillips, 226-7.

<sup>15</sup> Moreover, even if we grant Geivett and Phillips their three criteria for assessing revelation claims, it is not apparent to those from non-Christian religions that Christianity best meets these criteria. It is unlikely that the evidence for Christian miracles is better than the evidence for miracles in other religions. Moreover, other religions offer positive messages. The Buddhist claims to know the true path toward the elimination of suffering. Likewise, the Muslim believes that following the will of Allah will lead to the enjoyment of paradise. It simply is not clear that Christianity succeeds in meeting even Geivett and Phillips' own criteria.

*as evidence* and so the evidence cannot be weighed objectively. Although many religions have some type of scripture, these hardly hold the same normative weight when viewed from outside that religious tradition. The same applies to statements made by a religion's prophets as well as the accounts of alleged miracles and mystical experiences witnessed by members of a religion. If evidence of this type were superior on independent and universal grounds, one would expect a great deal more consensus among the religious peoples of the world. What we find, however, is a genuine deadlock. Although one must admit that apologetics are successful in winning over a small number of converts, there has been no widespread conversion of the type one would expect to take place if there were superior evidence for the truth of one religion on universal grounds.

Of course, one explanation of the failure of apologetics is not that the arguments are faulty, but that those from other religions are too emotionally tied to their own religion to see the merit of apologetic arguments for a rival religion. While emotional ties to particular religions should not be overlooked, such an appeal fails to explain why widespread conversion does not take place among *nonreligious* people. If there were the kind of independent evidence the apologist claims there is, one would expect, at the very least, that nonbelievers would flock to the apologist's religion. As this is not the case, it seems that apologetics are unsuccessful.

What ought we to conclude about the general failure of apologetics to demonstrate the truth of any particular religion? Certainly we cannot conclude that apologetics will fail *of necessity*. We ought to leave open the possibility that in the future some argument or other may provide good evidence for the claim that one religion approximates the truth very closely. It would be a monumental task to refute one-by-one

each attempt at apologetic argument. Nonetheless, I have provided good general reasons to doubt the success of apologetics. First, if the truth of a religion depends on the veracity of certain ancient historical facts, it is unlikely that the historical evidence will be sufficient to verify these claims. Second, no set of apologetic arguments to date has been able to persuade large numbers of people to convert by appealing to universally accessible reasons, as one would expect if there were strong independent evidence for the truth of one religion. Thus, we have good reason to doubt the likelihood of success for apologetics.

### *Definitive Claims and Epistemic Distance*

It seems as though apologetic arguments for the truth of any particular religion are not promising. A final way to defend I2 is to argue that some religion or other approximates the truth very closely even though the arguments for any *particular* religion being true are unsuccessful. This “Last Gasp” argument in favor of I2 maintains agnosticism about which religion is the true religion, but maintains that likely there is one that is true or very close to true. What reason do we have to believe the Last Gasp Argument? I will argue that there are good reasons to think that, given the general failure of apologetics, it is much more likely that I2 is false than true. It is more likely that no religion very closely approximates the truth. Through the following argument against I2, I will provide indirect evidence that the Last Gasp Argument fails. The main argument against I2 and for CP3 is as follows:

1. Religious theories (a) make claims concerning the infinite or transcendent, (b) do not appeal to universal reasons that can be used to reach consensus, and (c) make non-tentative assertions.

2. If religious theories (a) make claims concerning the infinite or transcendent, (b) do not appeal to universal reasons that can be used to reach consensus, and (c) make non-tentative assertions, then they likely do not approximate the truth very closely.
3. Therefore, it is likely that no particular religious theory approximates the truth very closely.

In what follows I will defend each premise of this argument in turn.

Let us first discuss premise 1. I have argued in Chapter 4 that religions are, in part, theories that, at best, approximate or partially model reality. One may note, however, that religious theories are not alone in this matter. Theories in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities are approximate as well. One characteristic feature of religious theories, however, is (a) that the religious domain somehow *transcends* the domain of the natural world. That is, religious theories attempt to describe a realm very different and less well known than the natural world.

Secondly, as discussed above (b) there seems to be a lack of any universal criteria that can be used to judge the truth of various religious claims. We are in no position to make accurate judgments about many religious historical claims. We cannot appeal to a particular religion's holy texts, prophets, or miracle claims because none of these maintain their epistemic weight outside of their respective religious traditions.<sup>16</sup> The failure of religions to provide universal reasons to sort the true religions from the false is exacerbated by the fact that religious claims are not *verifiable* nor based on *replicable observations* as are claims in many other fields of inquiry. Although it would be

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<sup>16</sup> This is the case if there are no independent reasons to assess the reliability of any of these sources of authority. Since, as I have argued above, one would expect members of competing religions to convert if such independent reasons existed, it seems that we have good reason to believe that such corroboration is unavailable.

inappropriate to demand verification and replicable observations in the realm of religion, this shortcoming is one more area where religion fails to appeal to universal reasons. Finally, unlike in many other disciplines, there are no standard instruments or accepted methods of proof across traditions. While an argument from a Christian apologist may appeal to Biblical authority or the doctrines established by early church councils to demonstrate his conclusion, neither of these sources of authority hold weight for the non-Christian. And, as we have seen in the case of Geivett and Phillips, attempts to appeal to *a priori* arguments often include hidden assumptions about what the true religion ought to include. As I have argued in my response to apologetics above, the hope that some evidence available to all will be able to identify which religion is true has gone largely unfulfilled.

Thirdly, (c) religious claims are almost always non-tentative. The Christian does not claim that Jesus Christ was “probably” God. The Buddhist does not believe that the Four Noble Truths are “the best we can come to truth in our poor epistemic condition.” Religious beliefs form the foundation of other beliefs, shape people’s lives, and, to many, are worth dying for. For the vast majority of religious believers, religious claims are far from tentative. Premise 1, then, is largely uncontroversial.

Although premise 1 may be true, what reason do we have for thinking that premise 2 is true, that theories with characteristics (a) – (c) likely do not approximate the truth very closely? Could it not be that one religion makes non-tentative statements about the transcendent, offers no universal reasons that can identify it as true, but nonetheless approximates the truth very closely? Certainly this is possible. I argue, however, that

these three elements present in religious theories make them less *likely* to approximate the truth very closely. I will treat each characteristic in turn.

First, because the domain of religious claims is largely transcendent, the reliable methods used to investigate the physical realm often are not applicable to it. In other words, those methods we are most familiar with and which we have good reason to trust in the ordinary physical realm will not be as useful in examining claims that *transcend* the physical realm. Even if we are able to reason about transcendent matters, it stands to reason that our assertions concerning these matters ought to be attributed a lower level of credence. Indeed, precisely because religious theories provide accounts of a realm so utterly different than our own, it is only natural to suppose that such theories will be less accurate than theories regarding our own realm. In accordance with this line of thinking, let us set forth the following principle:

The Principle of Epistemic Distance [PED]: the more remote or obscure an area of inquiry is given our epistemic position, the less likely it is that our explanations of that domain will closely match the truth.

PED appears to match our common sense intuitions on the matter. In the scientific realm, for instance, we are relatively good at explaining the forces and behaviors of ordinary, medium-sized objects. When we attempt to explain the inner workings of the atom or the evolution of the universe as a whole, it becomes a great deal more difficult. If the religious domain is even more inaccessible than some of these areas, PED gives us one reason to think that if religious claims approximate the truth, they do so to a much lesser degree than claims about the physical domain.

Secondly, because religious theories fail to appeal to universally accessible reasons, we have further reason to doubt that they approximate the truth very closely.

Recall from the previous chapter that both science and religion attempt to explain what is unobservable or partially hidden from us. This was one of the reasons to think that theories of either sort are approximations at best. While it is true that both God and the electron are unobservable, there seems to be more going for the particle physicist. To be more specific, the particle physicist has some universally accessible reasons she can appeal to. For one, there are some commonly agreed upon phenomena in the realm of physics. Although the proper interpretation of these phenomena is still a matter of debate, particle physicists have the advantage of *verifiable* and *repeatable* experiments. Physicists can infer the existence of electrons because of certain *repeated* observations. Although religion cannot be faulted for its inability to meet the standards of science, we do have reason to think that our scientific theories approximate the truth with a greater degree of certainty than do our religious theories simply because there is more corroborating evidence favoring our scientific theories.

The third reason to doubt that religious theories approximate the truth very closely is the non-tentative nature of religious claims. Despite the fact that religious theories are approximate ways of modeling reality, lack methods of verification and independent corroboration, and attempt to explain what transcends the material world, we do not find that religions make only tentative and hesitant claims as we might expect. If PED is correct and our religious theories approximate the truth to a lesser degree than our other theories, such claims ought to be qualified accordingly. But, this is not what we find among religious theories. Rather, religious claims are typically couched in terms of absolutes. There appears to be a disconnect here that Byrne calls an “inappropriate

absolutism.”<sup>17</sup> Though religious claims are based on less verifiable evidence than science and speculate about a realm entirely different than our own, religious theories appear to be less tentative than those in science which often are acknowledged to be “our best theory at the moment.” Just where one would expect something akin to agnosticism, we find precisely the opposite – firm belief in absolute assertions. Because we find ourselves in a poor epistemic position vis-à-vis the transcendent, with no universal method for identifying truth, it seems that we have good reason to doubt anything more than very tentative or hesitant assertions. Nonetheless, in religious theories we encounter claims of definitive truth. We can conclude, then, that such epistemically bold claims are unlikely to approximate the truth very closely.

#### *A Common Objection*

Perhaps the most likely objection to the preceding argument is this. Although the religious domain is more distant and obscure and there is a lack of universally acceptable answers in it, we *do* have reason to make non-tentative claims to religious truth. Certainly the human mind is incapable of comprehending the infinite depths of the divine. Nonetheless, God himself has revealed himself to us. Some, like Geivett and Phillips, may go as far as to say that *precisely because* we are unable to understand God, he wanted to make himself known to us.<sup>18</sup> On other religious accounts, religious doctrines are not the result of a personal God revealing himself to humanity but the wisdom that enlightened human beings attain from a higher state of spiritual knowledge.

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<sup>17</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 120.

<sup>18</sup> Geivett and Phillips, 225-6.

Indeed, either response explains why religious claims are often asserted with such certainty. If religious theories are largely the result of divine insight rather than the feeble attempts of ordinary people to explain religious truths, it is perhaps more apparent why religious claims are typically absolute rather than tentative.

Although this objection provides an explanation for non-tentative claims concerning the distant and obscure realm of the transcendent, it does not avoid the problem of universal reasons. There simply is not compelling evidence of revelation claims that appeal to universally accessible reasons. Aside from apologetic arguments based on sacred texts, miracles, prophets, and mystical experiences that will be unconvincing to members of opposing faiths, we have very little reason for thinking that God has revealed himself to one culture or tradition to the exclusion of others.<sup>19</sup> If it were the case that the some religion's claims are revealed through divine insight, my second premise would be highly suspect. Lacking any universal reasons for asserting any revelation claims, however, my argument for CP3 stands. It is likely that no one religion approximates the truth very closely.

### **Is One Religion Much Closer to the Truth Than All Others?**

In the previous section, I have refuted the inclusivist who maintains that a single religion is very close to the truth. An inclusivist, however, may be willing to take a second path and maintain instead:

I3: One religion is substantially closer to the truth than all other religions.

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<sup>19</sup> A parallel argument can be made against those who, instead of positing divine revelation, appeal to the spiritual insight of holy persons. In this case, there are no universally accessible reasons for supposing that the holy persons in one tradition have attained higher spiritual knowledge that has not been attained by holy persons in other traditions.

On this view, one religion may not be true or even very close to the truth, but is nonetheless a great deal better than the alternatives. Perhaps the religious believer is willing to concede that the religious domain is a vast mystery and any claims we can make concerning it are merely our best theories we have in our epistemically poor position. Nonetheless, the inclusivist may argue that one religious theory is worth believing because it is much better than all of the other alternative religions. The pluralist, on the contrary, denies I3 and asserts in its place:

CP3: No one religion is substantially closer to the truth than all other religions.

On the pluralist view, then, no one religion is a *real improvement* over every other religion. That is, even if one religion were closer to the truth than all others, it would not be so much closer that it would be rationally required to believe it rather than, say, the second closest religion.

In order to evaluate CP3 and I3, I would like to discuss each in the context of an analogy that should by now be familiar: the case of witnesses giving conflicting testimony.

Imagine I am sitting in my office and six people come in giving me different accounts of a certain incident that just took place out on Main Street. Let us further suppose that the six accounts are mutually incompatible.<sup>20</sup>

Call this example the Witness Case. It will be helpful to use the Witness Case as a kind of test case to see what would have to hold for CP3 to be true and what would have to hold for I3 to be true. Then we can compare both cases.

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<sup>20</sup> This story is based on a similar one provided in Byrne, "Reply to Yandell," 215.

What would be the relevant difference in the Witness Case between the following claims?

CP3\*: No one *witness's testimony* is substantially closer to the truth than the *testimony of all other witnesses*.

I3\*: One *witness's testimony* is substantially closer to the truth than the *testimony of all other witnesses*.

The difference between these cases is quite simple to sketch. To be a pluralist in the Witness Case is simply to think that none of the witnesses are in a substantially better epistemic position regarding the incident than any others. If, instead, one were to be an inclusivist in the Witness Case, one would argue that one of the witnesses was somehow in a better epistemic position to describe the events than all of the others. We can imagine cases that fit either type. In an I3\*-type case, one witness is very near the events as they take place while the other witnesses are further away and the events are obscured by darkness or some other obstacle. CP3\* is a logically weaker claim. For it to be true it only needs to be the case that I3\* is false. Thus, there are a number of cases that would fit this description. It may be that the events are obscured by darkness for all of the witnesses *or* it may be that a few of the witnesses are close to the events and for the rest the events are obscured by darkness. Another alternative would be if witnesses are staggered progressively further away from the incident so that none are significantly closer than every other. CP3\* cases include any of these alternative to I3\*. Our task now is to determine whether the I3\*-type account, where one witness is close to the incident and the rest are in an epistemically disadvantaged position, is more likely than the alternatives in the case of *religious* claims. Let us now turn from the Witness Case to the religious case and examine whether CP3 or I3 is the more plausible account.

The religious case is not unlike the Witness Case. In religion, we are presented with a number of contradictory answers to similar questions. Should we believe that one of these accounts is the result of privileged access to the religious domain and makes claims that are significantly closer to the truth than other religious accounts? Or, should we deny that any account is significantly better than all others? Let us first examine some reasons in support of I3. Then, I will offer two main arguments in support of CP3.

### *Inclusivist Arguments*

There are a number of reasons one may have for thinking that one religion is far superior to all of the rest in terms of truth. Perhaps the most obvious strategy is to point to the evidence provided by particular religions. I have already provided general reasons to doubt that apologetic arguments such as these succeed. If the attempt to identify independent evidence as grounds for thinking that one religion's claims are much more accurate than the others are unsuccessful, what other reasons do we have for embracing I3? I will discuss two such reasons.

First, it may seem likely that one culture simply happened to discover religious truths that other cultures have not. There are certainly parallels to this in other fields of inquiry. Often some cultures develop tactics of warfare or develop fields of study such as geometry or astronomy long before other cultures do. In the same way, it seems likely in the case of religion that through some sort of spiritual superiority or perhaps a bit of luck, one culture discovered religious truths that were far more advanced than that of other cultures. Let us call this the Cultural Superiority thesis (CS). Let us examine the evidence for this claim. In examples of cultural superiority, typically it is apparent that

one culture has found some truth that other cultures lack. Indeed, whether it is advanced tactics in warfare or advancements in science, when one culture has some privileged knowledge, it seems to spread among cultures. For instance, the Egyptians developed certain engineering and geometric principles. These were absorbed and developed in Greek culture, and then through the Hellenization of the ancient world, these principles spread to a variety of cultures. We would expect a similar phenomenon if one religious culture had come across religious truths that were hidden from other cultures.

A Christian inclusivist, then, may point to the rapid rise of Christianity in the centuries after Christ as evidence of just this phenomenon. Just as the knowledge of geometry spread from ancient Egypt to other ancient cultures, Christianity spread from the Middle East to the Mediterranean in a short amount of time after its beginnings. There is, however, an additional factor found in the growth of religions that is not found in the case of the expansion of other areas of knowledge. Just as Christianity grew exponentially in its first centuries, many incompatible religions grew dramatically in their first centuries as well. If the dramatic growth of a religion is *prima facie* evidence for CS, the similar spread of a largely incompatible body of beliefs provides an overriding defeater for CS. Because Buddhism and Christianity, for example, contain such contrasting claims, it is clear that both cannot be genuine bodies of knowledge. The fact that Christianity spread so quickly, then, cannot count as evidence that ancient Christian culture discovered truths that other cultures failed to discover. The same argument applies to other cultures claiming to have privileged religious knowledge. And, lacking successful apologetic arguments in favor of particular religious claims, it seems that we do not have good reason to think that one culture is “spiritually advanced.”

There is also a second strategy for defending inclusivism, particularly for those religions that assert a personal God. If God is a benevolent and transcendent being in many ways incomprehensible to the human mind, it is not unreasonable to expect God to reveal himself to humankind in one definitive instance. By providing one clear instance of revelation, humankind will have a basis for religious knowledge that they would not otherwise have. If there were such a revelation, however, it would take place at one place and time and thus be particular to one culture. Let us call this the Exclusive Revelation thesis (ER). According to ER, it is perfectly reasonable for one religious tradition to have clear religious knowledge that other traditions lack.

The major objection to ER, however, is that it appears to be incompatible with a benevolent or just God. If God truly is good, revealing himself to some human beings or cultures while leaving others wholly in the dark “can seem to be an odd way for a deity to behave.”<sup>21</sup> The criticism that a good God would not reveal himself to some and not others is an instance of the problem of evil.<sup>22</sup> If intentionally leaving some people in the dark on matters of fundamental importance is an evil, then it can rightly be asked, “why does God permit such a thing?” Moreover, this evil appears to be inscrutable. If God can reveal himself to all of humanity at once, revealing himself to one segment of humanity to the detriment of all others appears to be an unnecessary evil. As theists who respond to the problem of evil are quick to point out, however, human beings are not in the proper epistemic position to tell whether any given instance of evil is necessary or

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<sup>21</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 17. For more discussion of this criticism see Peter Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism* (London: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> More accurately, this may be called an instance of the problem of divine hiddenness. There is some debate as to whether the problem of divine hiddenness is a subset of the problem of evil. See J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).

unnecessary.<sup>23</sup> If we have independent reason to believe in an omnibenevolent God, we have reason to think that every instance of apparent unnecessary evil is necessary for some good purpose God has.

In the same way, then, one might argue that we have reason to believe that an omnibenevolent God exists and that he would reveal himself at one particular time and place. Given these two background beliefs, it follows that an exclusive revelation, if it is evil, is an evil necessary for some greater purpose that limited human beings do not understand. Thus, whether or not the argument in favor of an exclusive revelation is successful depends on *apologetic arguments for the specific background beliefs in question*. In fact, there is reason to at least doubt ER. Simply put, there appears to be no benefit to an exclusive revelation that a universal revelation does not have. And as I have argued above, apologetic arguments of the sort Geivett and Phillips offer in favor of a definitive revelation make use of assumptions that are not likely to be accepted by non-Christians. Thus, there seems very little independent reason to believe that ER is true.

If what I have argued so far is true, that there is not enough evidence to believe either the Cultural Superiority thesis or the Exclusive Revelation thesis and that apologetic arguments are unlikely to succeed, what positive reasons do we have for thinking CP3 is true instead? Why should we believe that no one religion is significantly closer to the truth than all other religions? I offer two such arguments below. Both the existence of “saints” in many religious traditions and the epistemic parity of religious experience claims provide evidence against the inclusivist claim that one religion

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<sup>23</sup> For a well-known response on these grounds, see Stephen J. Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance,’” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): 73-93.

tradition somehow has significantly better access to religious truth than all other religions.

*The Evidence of Saints*

John Hick argues for pluralism on the basis that saints and holy people are found among all of the major religions. The thrust of his argument is this. He claims that we can roughly gauge whether religions have similar access to religious truth by examining their ability to produce saints. Because all of the major religions are more or less equally good at producing saints, the best explanation of these facts is that all of the major religions are “vehicles of the truth.”

Hick sees all of the major religions as offering different paths to the same goal. Christianity offers one path with its claim that Jesus was God Incarnate and that faith in him will bring one to eternal life. The Buddhist claims that the suffering and aimlessness of life may be removed by following the Eightfold Path. Every major religion seems to give some new program for attaining fulfillment. Nonetheless, Hick sees these seemingly divergent paths as ultimately leading to the same goal:

I suggest that these different conceptions of salvation are specifications of what, in a generic formula, is the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to a new orientation, centered in the divine Reality.<sup>24</sup>

But what reason do we have for thinking that all religions offer equally *good* paths to salvation? Hick claims that the spiritual “fruits” present in the great spiritual men and women produced by different religions offers such evidence.<sup>25</sup> He claims that if there

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<sup>24</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 55.

<sup>25</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 56.

were a change from “self-centeredness” to “Reality-centeredness,” then such a change would make itself apparent in the behavior of a religion’s saints.<sup>26</sup>

Using this criterion, Hick is able to distinguish those “superior” religions or paths from the “inferior” ones. Those religions that produce saints, the so-called “moral” religions, are superior to those religions that tend not to produce saints simply because they are better at leading its members to salvation or self-transformation. On his view, the moral religions, primarily those, “originating or rooted in the ‘axial age’ of the first millennium B.C.E.,” are more or less on par because they profess a similar morality.<sup>27</sup> This common morality shows itself largely in love and compassion toward other people. Thus, given that our experience of saints and holy people from these axial (or “great”) religions is largely the same, we can conclude that all of the axial religions are more or less successful in achieving salvation.

According to Hick,

...we have no good reason to believe that any one of the great religious traditions has proved itself to be more productive of love/compassion than another.<sup>28</sup>

If one of these great religions were superior to another, we would expect to see more saints out of that religion than out of the others.<sup>29</sup> Hick argues that if Christianity were true, for instance,

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<sup>26</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 56.

<sup>27</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 55-6.

<sup>28</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 58.

<sup>29</sup> Hick, “A Pluralist View,” 41.

Should not the fruit of the Spirit, which according to Paul is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23), be more evident in Christian than in non-Christian lives?<sup>30</sup>

And, since it is the case that these spiritual fruits are *not* more prevalent among Christians than non-Christians, we have good evidence that Christianity is not superior to other religions. Rather, the fact that all of the moral religions are equally successful in this regard is evidence that they all have roughly equal access to religious truth.

Hick’s position has been attacked from a number of different angles. I have reservations myself about Hick’s generic definition of salvation as transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Although all of the “moral religions” may offer different paths to self-transformation loosely speaking, there seems to be little reason for thinking that all of these religions provide paths to the *same* goal. Indeed, what each religion identifies as the “self-transformative goal” appears different. For Christians it involves an afterlife in the presence of the divine. For Buddhists it is a state of personal enlightenment that can be attained during one’s lifetime. These specific goals, although perhaps in the same genus, appear to be distinct. But this is beside the point. Hick claims that the best explanation of the fact that all moral religions are equally good at producing saints is that all moral religions have similar access to religious truth.<sup>31</sup> Whether or not we agree with Hick’s concept of salvation, is there any reason to think that the production of saints has any relation to the truth of a religion?

First, we should note that Hick’s thesis is stronger than it needs to be to support CP3. For it to be the case that no one religion is substantially closer to the truth than all

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<sup>30</sup> Hick, “A Pluralist View,” 41.

<sup>31</sup> Hick, “A Pluralist View,” 44-5.

other religions, it need not be the case that all religions are *equal* in their epistemic position. Rather, the pluralist only requires that no one religion is in a position significantly better than all other religions. Even so, it seems that there is reason to doubt the relation between the production of saints and access to truth. It seems perfectly coherent for a religion to produce saints simply because its *moral* claims and the moral training that stem from it are effective in producing superior moral people although its *metaphysical* teachings may be quite far from the truth.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as long as a religion is morally effective, it may not even need to make any metaphysical claims whatsoever. Such a religion could be quite good at producing saints despite being either agnostic or mostly false. In this way, one could argue that the production of saints has no bearing at all on our analysis of CP3 and I3.

One response to this objection is to argue that there is more to “sainthood” than simply being a morally good person. Hick himself defines saints and holy people not simply as those who are morally superior, but also as those who attain *spiritual* superiority.

Saintliness, or ego-transcending Reality-centeredness, expresses itself, as I have already suggested, in different forms of life, some involving withdrawal from the world in prayer or meditation whilst others involve practical engagement in social or political action, and yet others in a mixture or an alternation of these.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, what is classified as “spiritually superiority” will vary from religion to religion. Nonetheless, on any definition, spiritual superiority is something distinct from

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<sup>32</sup> Although many apologists may argue that a religion’s metaphysical claims are necessary in order to support its ethical claims, it seems clear that the ethical claims may be true despite the falsity of the metaphysical claims.

<sup>33</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 303.

mere moral excellence. We can think of it as some level of relief from spiritual ills, a type of “liberation.” On Hick’s view, moral superiority is intimately connected with this spiritual liberation:

[S]uffering of every kind is that from which we seek deliverance; and the awareness of the ultimate unity of the human race, which all the great traditions engender, makes it a responsibility to relieve the suffering of others where we can.<sup>34</sup>

The relationship between moral behavior and the spiritual “liberation” achieved by prayer or meditation highlights the fact that saintliness involves *more* than simple moral behavior. Indeed, there is a great deal of non-religious, yet morally admirable people whom we would be hesitant to call “saints” or holy people. It is not simply that true religions produce morally admirable people. Rather, they tend to create those who are concerned with relieving both *spiritual* and physical suffering.

If one admits that there is this further condition of sainthood, let us call it “spiritual liberation,” we might ask, (a) whether the existence of spiritually liberated saints is evidence that a religion has a favorable epistemic position regarding religious truth, and if so, (b) whether there is evidence that significantly more saints or significantly better saints are present in one religion.

The answer to (b) is quite obviously “no.” Hick appears to be correct on this matter:

I believe we can see from direct observation and by attending to the reports of others that this [saintliness] is indeed happening within each of the great traditions. But if we now attempt comparative judgments, asking whether tradition A has produced more, or better, saints per million of population than tradition B, we quickly discover that we do not have sufficient information for an answer. All that I myself feel able to venture

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<sup>34</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 306.

at present is the impressionistic judgment that no one tradition stands out as more productive of sainthood than another.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed we know of monks in the Christian tradition and the Buddhist tradition, holy Sikhs, Hindus, Jews, and Muslims. Some percentage of members of all of these groups are known for their devotion to prayer or meditation, often withdrawing from the world, and seeking what they may describe as spiritual liberation. If we are to accept their testimony at face value it seems that we have no evidence that one particular religious tradition is any better at realizing spiritual liberation than all of the rest. We simply do not have the saints-per-million statistics that would be necessary to make such a comparison. Hick claims that each of these traditions are roughly equal in their production of saints. But we do not need to make such a strong claim in order to defend CP3. Whether or not all religions produce saints to an equal degree, we can say with confidence that no one religion appears to produce saints to a degree significantly greater than all others.

The remaining question, then, is (a) whether the relative parity of spiritually liberated saints among religious traditions is any evidence that access to religious truth is generally dispersed among religions as well. I claim that there is indeed a connection of this sort. Hick's discussion of the "spiritual fruits" of a true religion is helpful here. Consider that religious claims include not simply metaphysical assertions but recommendations concerning behavior and spiritual liberation or salvation as well. Thus, if a religion is a "vehicle of truth," that is, if it has access to religious truths, one would expect there to be some evidence, or "fruits," of this epistemic access. It is not as though Hick conflates religious truth with moral behavior. Rather, on his view saintliness is the

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<sup>35</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 307.

spiritual fruit we would expect from members of a true religion. Thus, the fact that we do not find it exclusively in one religion is evidence that one religion is not significantly closer to the truth.

Let us return to the Witness Case for a moment. Let us suppose that the witnesses that were in an epistemically favorable position were sprayed with some sort of “witness paint.” Let us further suppose that (1) those that were in an epistemically better position were sprayed much more than those who were epistemically worse off, and that (2) witness paint partially blends into one’s clothing and is thus hard to see. Just as saintliness is difficult to detect and cannot be accurately documented, it is also difficult to identify the witnesses that were in epistemically superior positions. Moreover, witness paint residue is not itself accurate testimony but a *sign* of likely accurate testimony. Likewise, saintliness is a sign that one’s religious beliefs are somewhat accurate. If we keep in mind that religious truth includes practical as well as theoretical claims it seems that it is reasonable to expect those who know the truth to at least display the fruits of this knowledge to *some* degree more than others. If one religion were significantly closer to the truth than others, we would imagine that there would be some practical evidence that this were the case. Of course it would be unreasonable to expect all members of a religion to be saints. But, it would be exceedingly odd if one religion were far superior in terms of religious knowledge but displayed nothing more in terms of saintliness. Indeed, noting that saintliness seems evenly dispersed among religious traditions, Hick asks,

But is this what we would expect if Christians have a more complete and direct access to God than anyone else and live in a closer relationship to him, being indwelt by the Holy Spirit?<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Hick, “A Pluralist View,” 41.

Simply put, the evidence of spiritual fruits does not favor the view that one religion is significantly closer to the truth than all other religions although this is what we would expect if I3 rather than CP3 were true.

### *Religious Experience*

A further argument in favor of CP3 takes religious experience as its subject. According to this argument, the pervasiveness and epistemic parity of religious experience among adherents of various religions is evidence against the claim that one religion is significantly closer to the truth. By 'religious experience' I mean to include both what can be called "mystical experience," an overpowering or ineffable encounter with the divine, as well as more ordinary experiences such as being awestruck in contemplating nature or having the feeling of being guided by a higher being.

Let us examine for a moment what the Witness Case tells us about the epistemic value we place on personal experience. Suppose that you are one of the witnesses. You report that you saw a fight take place between two men. Later, however, you find out that what you reported take place directly contradicts the report of many other witnesses. Some witnesses report that two women were fighting. Others report that two groups of people were fighting. Finally, others report that a man and a monkey were fighting. Hearing such different accounts of what took place, you become very puzzled. You wonder whether what you *thought* you saw was correct. But you also wonder whether everyone else has simply been deceived. You felt that you saw the incident pretty clearly. Perhaps no one else had as good a view. Upon speaking with the other witnesses, however, you find that they are equally puzzled. Every other witness felt that

she had a good view of the incident as well and they each wonder whether everyone else has been deceived.

This state of affairs is similar to many cases of religious experience. Although it is rare for many people to have contradictory experiences of the same event, religious experience are often interpreted in inconsistent ways. We can say that two religious experiences are “contradictory” when they are interpreted in a way such that they cannot both be veridical. Suppose, for instance, that a Christian has an experience of the resurrected Jesus and a Hindu has a mystical experience of the god Vishnu. Let us further suppose that the Christian interprets his experience as being of the one and only God. On such an interpretation, these experiences cannot both be simultaneously veridical. If Jesus is the one and only God, a member of the Trinity, the god Vishnu cannot exist. As in the Witness Case, cases of religious experience can provide inconsistent pieces of testimony. Confronted with such a situation, should the Christian doubt the truth of what he thought he knew or should he continue to believe it as before? In other words, does the existence of many contradictory accounts count as a reason for doubting one’s own view?

Hick takes the position that if one is justified in trusting one’s religious experiences, others must be as well:

In acknowledging this we are obeying the intellectual Golden Rule of granting to others a premise on which we rely ourselves. Persons living within other traditions, then, are equally justified in trusting their own distinctive religious experience and in forming their beliefs on the basis of it. For the only reason for treating one’s tradition differently from others is the very human, but not very cogent, reason that it is one’s own!<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 235.

Those who accept their own religious experiences as veridical but reject the religious experiences of others as delusory, on Hick's view, are violating this "intellectual Golden Rule." They are using a premise to support their own views but rejecting that it can be used to support the views of others simply because other views contradict their own. In the Witness Case, the witness who argues that every other witness must be deluded because their testimonies contradict her own is being intellectually dishonest in this way. The proper position for a witness to take, it seems, would be puzzlement. Although one may be quite sure of what one saw, the fact that the other witnesses are equally sure of what they saw should make one sincerely puzzled as to what really happened. Of course, as human beings we may tend to trust our own experiences more than that of others. But, as Hick notes, all other things being equal, the fact that an experience is one's own is not a good reason for treating it differently. It certainly is not an impartial reason for doing so.

If Hick is correct that we ought to grant to others the same justification for their experiential claims as we grant to ourselves, what does this imply about I3 or CP3? Return to the original account of the Witness Case in this chapter. In it, we suppose that you are not a witness, but a neutral party who hears of the incident from the various pieces of contradictory testimony. Recall that we are trying to determine whether the pervasiveness of religious experience is evidence for or against the claim that one religion is significantly closer to the truth than all others. Of course it would violate the spirit of this project to assume that we ourselves are members of a particular religious tradition and have religious experiences of a specific sort. Recall Peter van Inwagen's notion of an ideally agnostic audience in Chapter 1. Given that the aim of my project is

to convince such an audience, we ought to assess the epistemic value of religious experience from this neutral perspective. Thus, even if we are in fact members of a particular tradition, we ought to assume a distant and reflective stance toward this question. We ought to concern ourselves not with what a particular witness ought to believe but with what a neutral party ought to believe in the face of conflicting experience. Because this neutral party has no personal experience that will be weighted more simply because it is one's own, he will be able to make the distant and reflective judgment we are interested in.

So, what ought the neutral party believe in the face of contrary testimony? Hick's method for resolving the disagreement is to assert that the different cultural and conceptual frameworks of religious believers account for the variety of inconsistent religious experiences:

It is at this point that individual and cultural factors enter the process. The religious tradition of which we are a part, with its history and ethos and its great exemplars, its scriptures feeding our thoughts and emotions, and perhaps above all its devotional or meditative practices, constitutes an uniquely shaped and coloured "lens" through which we are concretely aware of the Real specifically as the personal Adonai, or as the Heavenly Father, or as Allah, or Vishnu, or Shiva...<sup>38</sup>

For Hick, then, our religious tradition and the conceptual background that it instills, influences our religious experience to such an extent that we experience the Real *as* whatever our tradition has trained us to experience it as. According to Hick, the neutral party should believe that each religious experience is a valid response to religious reality seen through different "lenses." In the end, however, it seems that because each experience is overly influenced by one's cultural and conceptual framework, no

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<sup>38</sup> Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 59.

experiential account is actually true. Hick specifically denies this charge. Although one's religious experiences are seen through the "lens" of a particular religious tradition, this, "is not to suppose that they are illusions."<sup>39</sup> Rather, he sees the divergence in religious experiences to be not unlike the various experiences of a mountain when viewed from many angles.<sup>40</sup>

If Hick responds by comparing religious experience to ordinary experience in this way, however, he falls victim to a second charge. Just imagine if this account of religious disagreement were applied to ordinary cases like the Witness Case. Would it suffice to say that the difference between the testimony of the witness who saw two women fighting and the testimony of the witness who saw two *men* fighting could be explained by different cultural or conceptual schemes? Surely not. In ordinary circumstances such as these, it would be much more plausible to deny that both accurately saw the event than to explain away the difference in the way Hick has. If he wants to maintain that conceptual schemes account for different experiences, it seems, religious experiences need to be somewhat different than ordinary experiences such as viewing a mountain from multiple angles. In response to this challenge, Hick argues that the transcendent nature of religious beliefs does allow for more influence from one's conceptual framework over one's experiences than in ordinary cases.<sup>41</sup> But, on his view, the Real is completely beyond human categories and cannot be experienced in itself, but

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<sup>39</sup> Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 60.

<sup>40</sup> Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 60.

<sup>41</sup> Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 60.

only “as it appears through our various human thought-forms.”<sup>42</sup> Because all of the content of a religious experience is supplied by one’s conceptual framework on this account, it seems that despite all of Hick’s posturing he cannot avoid the conclusion that religious experiences are simply illusions.

Here Hick seems caught in a dilemma. If religious experience is no different than ordinary perceptual experience, than explaining the differences in testimony in terms of various conceptual schemes seems implausible. But, if religious experience is of something wholly transcendent (i.e. Hick’s Real), then fully explaining differences in testimony in terms of various conceptual schemes appears to make religious experiences illusory.

Hick provides one response to the question of what the neutral party ought to do with contradictory testimony of religious experience. Peter Byrne provides a different response that borrows some aspects from Hick’s view but avoids his dilemma. Byrne criticizes Hick for being too much of an idealist to preserve the veridicality of religious experience. According to Byrne, Hick’s account,

...embodies too extreme a form of constructivism in relation to religious experience. It is so extreme as to threaten directly the presumption that religious experience points to contact with a human independent reality.<sup>43</sup>

If Hick is correct that the Muslim’s religious experiences allegedly of Allah are of “the Real” filled in with the cultural framework he has inherited from Islam, it appears that his experience is little more than a conceptual construction. Religious experience is hardly veridical as Hick maintains.

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<sup>42</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 59.

<sup>43</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 127.

Part of Byrne's motivation for rejecting Hick's account of religious experience is his view that experience ought to be taken as *prima facie* reliable. Although he agrees with Hick that "to some degree or other all such experiences are informed by beliefs and concepts, and that they thus come with an interpretive load that links them with some confession or other,"<sup>44</sup> he recognizes the limitations of our own conceptual input in religious experiences:

Experiences should be taken on trust and this implies that their component interpretations should be accorded *prima facie* plausibility. This means further that, other things being equal, they should be taken as giving some support to the doctrines with which their interpretations enmesh them.<sup>45</sup>

Nonetheless, he notes:

One circumstance which takes away that *prima facie* plausibility is the existence of experiences of contrary traditions which enmesh with contrary doctrines.<sup>46</sup>

Rather than make Hick's move and turn religious experiences into little more than illusions, Byrne takes what he thinks is a "common sense response" to differences in *perceptual* experience:<sup>47</sup>

If we find a number of observers giving divergent and conflicting accounts of one part of our world, we should conclude, in the absence of special reasons to the contrary, that none of them was giving an utterly reliable account. *Our* account of what they *really* observed should be cast in terms that favour none but captures something minimal that is confirmed by all.... [W]hat these divergent experiences are *prima facie* evidence for... [is] a minimal picture of a religious object that might be behind all, or as many as is reasonably possible, of these divergent experiences.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 127-8.

<sup>45</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 128.

<sup>46</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 128.

<sup>47</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 127.

<sup>48</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 127-8. His italics.

Byrne's approach to cases such as the Witness Case, then, is to treat the testimony of each witness as *prima facie* reliable, but note that the cumulative body of contradictory testimony gives us reason to doubt the testimony of each particular witness. His position, however, differs from Hick. Rather than attribute *all* of the difference in testimony to different conceptual and cultural schemes, Byrne posits "something minimal" that might be behind all or many religious experiences. Elsewhere Byrne says of the Witness Case, "I may be able to be sure that they did collectively see something"<sup>49</sup> despite the fact that they disagree on precisely what they did see. On Hick's view, however, we cannot even be sure whether religious experience is "of something" rather than a mere illusion because the experience is fully explained in terms of the conceptual framework of one's religious traditions.

It seems as though Byrne's response is more commonsensical. Although we would be quite puzzled if we were a neutral party hearing contrary testimonies, it is quite likely that we would be inclined to say that "something" happened although we may have very little idea what that "something" is. Byrne's realist approach provides a better account of conflicting religious experiences than Hick's position because it gives religious experience the *prima facie* credence we would be willing to give normal perceptual experience. Just as we ought to accept perceptual experience as defeasibly reliable, Byrne is correct that we ought to treat religious experience in the same way.

But does Byrne's account provide evidence against the claim that one religion approximates the truth to a significantly greater degree than all others? We can suppose, with Byrne, that religious experiences provide *prima facie* justification for religious

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<sup>49</sup> Byrne, "Reply to Yandell," 215.

claims and that contradictory testimony counteracts such justification. A neutral party, presented with contradictory testimony, cannot maintain that the religious experiences of one tradition are veridical and deny the veridicality of other traditions' religious experiences without any independent grounds to favor one over the other. Moreover, given my general criticism of apologetics, it seems as though we do not have independent grounds to treat one set of religious experiences as better supported than others. If we are to assume the "distant and reflective" stance in evaluating CP3 and I3, then we ought to embrace Byrne's position. We ought to take no piece of testimony as fully reliable but affirm that there is something minimal behind them all. How this minimal commonality is fleshed out is of little importance to the current project, however. If we have good reason to take Byrne's stance, however it is fleshed out, we have good reason to deny that one religion is significantly closer to the truth than all others.

Not unexpectedly, there are a number of criticisms to this account of the diversity of religious experience. Keith Yandell criticizes pluralists like Hick and Byrne on multiple grounds. First, Yandell argues that the appeal to the cultural framework of one's tradition to explain the differences in religious experiences is unsuccessful. He argues that there is nothing incompatible between X's being explained in terms of one's cultural framework and X's being true:<sup>50</sup>

Only if we have some reason to think that what is anthropologically explained is also false are we justified in adding that the anthropological explanation is sufficient in the sense of telling the whole cognitive and causal story regarding what is explained.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Keith Yandell, "Reply to Byrne," in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 211.

<sup>51</sup> Yandell, "Reply to Byrne," 211.

Yandell is correct here. The fact that religious experience can be explained by appeal to one's cultural and conceptual background does not mean that it offers a complete explanation. In fact, Byrne seems to recognize this. Even though we may be able to partially explain religious experience in this way, he is reluctant to explain away *all* of religious experience. To do so would leave us in Hick's situation where all religious experience is conceptually constructed. Thus, it is not merely the fact that religious experience can, at least partially, be explained in terms of anthropological or cultural frameworks that persuades him to take his pluralist stance. It is also the *disagreement* between experiential accounts that does so.

In response, Yandell argues that rational disagreement is also not evidence for the claim that no one religion is true. Indeed, disagreement is not incompatible with one religion being discernibly true and many religions being false.<sup>52</sup> Again Yandell seems correct on this point. There are a number of issues where there is wide disagreement but nonetheless one religion is discernibly true. Alvin Plantinga raises similar criticisms. He focuses primarily on principles such as Hick's "intellectual Golden Rule," that Byrne also seems to endorse. For Plantinga, the fact that a position contrary to my own seems just as true to others as my position seems to me is not itself a reason to doubt my own position. Plantinga uses moral beliefs as an example. Discussing things that appear to him quite wrong such as racial bigotry, he argues:

As a matter of fact, there isn't a lot I believe more strongly. I recognize, however, that there are those who disagree with me; and once more, I doubt that I could find an argument to show them that I am right and they wrong. Further, for all I know, their conflicting beliefs have for them the same internally available epistemic markers, the same phenomenology, as

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<sup>52</sup> Yandell, "Reply to Byrne," 211.

mine have for me. Am I then being arbitrary, treating similar cases differently in continuing to hold, as I do, that in fact that kind of behavior *is* dreadfully wrong? I don't think so.<sup>53</sup>

According to Plantinga, there is nothing arbitrary or “intellectually dishonest” in taking what seems to him to be true *as true* and what seems to him to be false *as false*.

Although one may admit that opposing beliefs may *seem* as true to others as one's beliefs seem to oneself, one need not admit that the two beliefs are on par. Rather, one may maintain that others are somehow mistaken or have “*a blind spot*” or are otherwise epistemically disadvantaged. In other words, continuing to hold a belief in the face of disagreement is not arbitrary at all.

Yandell also raises a particular problem for the religious pluralist who makes an argument from disagreement. He argues that religious pluralism itself is the subject of much criticism and disagreement and is also explainable in terms of the cultural and conceptual framework of religious pluralists. Thus, according to their own methodology, religious pluralists have reason to doubt their very positions!<sup>54</sup> According to Yandell and Plantinga, then, the pluralist argument from disagreement in religious experience appears to be suspect.

In order to respond to these criticisms against the pluralist position, I would like to return once again to the Witness Case. Let us suppose that each witness feels equally confident that what she saw actually happened. In Plantinga's terminology, we can suppose that all of the witnesses have the same “internally available epistemic markers.” Each witness, then, has some inclination to think that his or her testimony is correct and

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<sup>53</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism,” in *Religious Diversity*, 182. His italics.

<sup>54</sup> Yandell, “Reply to Byrne,” 211-2.

that all of the others have gone somewhat wrong. Although we cannot fault any witness for believing what *seems to her* to be correct (indeed we would likely do the same ourselves), we *as the neutral party* do have grounds to doubt the testimony of each witness. If we recall that the aim of my project is to convince the ideal agnostic audience that Critical Pluralism is most likely true, Plantinga's claim that one is perfectly within one's epistemic rights to stick to a belief despite disagreement does not identify a flaw with the position I am defending. Our ideally agnostic audience member has no particular inclination to be an inclusivist rather than a pluralist. Thus, such an audience member, we can imagine, is not herself a "witness," but a neutral party.

Yandell is correct that there is nothing incompatible between the claim that one religion is discernibly true and the claim that there is significant disagreement concerning the subject of religious experience. Nonetheless, suppose that we take on the position of a neutral party and do not have the internal epistemic markers of the witnesses. If we admit that there is a general failure in the search for apologetic arguments, it seems clear that we have to give the testimony of each witness the same weight, asserting the truth of no particular testimony. Yandell is correct that one religion *could* be discernibly true despite disagreement. In this case, however, it appears more likely that one religion is *not* discernibly true.

What of Yandell's criticism that the pluralist position is self-refuting? Following Yandell, it seems that we could construct a parallel argument against Hick and Byrne on the basis of disagreement. For example, there are many people for whom pluralism seems false and there are some for whom it seems true. All involved may be just as confident in their seeming states. Although each person may be justified in her belief,

from our *neutral point of view*, we ought to treat the pluralist position with the same weight that we treat the inclusivist or the exclusivist positions lacking any independent grounds to think otherwise. Moreover, we can explain away the seeming states of the pluralist, inclusivist, and exclusivist as at least partly culturally conditioned.<sup>55</sup> Thus, we ought not suppose that one position on religious diversity is the correct one. Rather, we ought to say that neither the pluralist nor the inclusivist or exclusivist has an entirely accurate account of religious diversity and that neither position is significantly closer to the truth than all others.

This argument mimicking the pluralist argument from religious experience, however, is flawed for two main reasons. First, although we ought to treat experience as *prima facie* reliable, it does not follow that we ought to do the same for everything that “seems to us” to be true. Simply because it seems to Hick that pluralism is true, for example, does not mean that we ought to grant it the same *prima facie* epistemic weight that we grant to an individual who has a religious experience and claims to have felt the presence of God. In other words, experiences may carry more epistemic weight than the “seeming” that a position is true. Secondly, Yandell seems to oversimplify Byrne’s position. It is not as though the *mere fact of disagreement* between different accounts of religious experience is ground for holding the pluralist view. Rather, Byrne appeals to the fact that there is disagreement and no independent way to settle the matter. Lacking any other reason to trust the experiences of one religious tradition over another, we ought to assume that none are entirely accurate accounts. Yandell seems to ignore this “*prima*

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<sup>55</sup> For example, one could argue that it only seems to Hick and Byrne that pluralism is true for cultural reasons (e.g. they were raised in a culture that accepted many religious points of view, they have interacted with people from multiple religions, and so on).

facie” clause. Moreover, when we examine the case of pluralism versus inclusivism or exclusivism, *there are* independent reasons to think one account is more likely to be correct than another. This work is an attempt to provide some of those independent reasons. Thus, the pluralist need not doubt his position simply because there is much disagreement on the matter and his views can be partially accounted for by his conceptual framework. Regardless of the possible merits of Yandell and Plantinga’s arguments, they do not hold up as arguments *against CP3*. On the contrary, it appears that the epistemic parity of religious experience gives us good reason to think that a neutral party ought to embrace CP3. No religion is significantly closer to the truth than all others.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have refuted two moderate inclusivist positions, I2 and I3. To refute I2, the claim that one religion approximates the truth very closely, I appealed to the general failure of apologetics. The inability of apologetic arguments to convince large numbers of converts is the result of (a) the inability to ascertain certain facts of ancient history, and (b) the genuine lack of universally accessible reasons in the realm of religion. I further appealed to the transcendent, and thus epistemically distant, nature of the religious domain as well as the non-tentative nature of religious assertions in order to argue that if religious theories approximate the truth at all, they do so to a much lesser degree than theories in our more accessible fields of inquiry.

In order to refute I3, that one religion is significantly closer to the truth than all other religions, I appealed to the pervasiveness of both religious saints and religious experience. There does not appear to be a higher proportion of saints in one religion, as

we would expect if one religion were much closer to the truth than all other religions. Moreover, through a comparison to ordinary cases of incompatible testimony such as the Witness Case, I have argued that we ought to treat the competing evidence of religious experience among various religious traditions as epistemically on par. On these grounds, we fail to have any reason to think one religion is in a significantly better epistemic position than every other. Given our evidence, then, we can conclude that it is unlikely that there exists one religion that is a *real improvement* on all others. Because CP2 and CP3 are merely the negations of I2 and I3 respectively, we can conclude that CP2 is more likely than I2 and CP3 is more likely than I3. This is not to say, however, that all religions approximate the truth to roughly the same degree. Although no religion is significantly closer to the truth than *all* others, *some* religions may be significantly closer to the truth than *some* others. Indeed, this is what I will argue for in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER 6: *Pluralism*

The well-known Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant is often presented as an explanation of the pluralist thesis. Here is one version of the parable:

Once upon a time, six blind men happened to come near a standing elephant. They felt, with their hands, different parts of the huge animal, and began disputing about its nature. One caught the end of the tail, and said it was a broom or brush. Another felt the trunk, and declared it was a huge python. A third found an ear, and affirmed that it was a large winnowing-fan. A fourth found the abdomen, and maintained it was a vast drum. A fifth stroked a leg, and asserted it was a thick column. A sixth grasped a tusk, and was sure it was a very large pestle. A seventh person happened to pass, and saw them disputing. He had eyes, was a man of vision, a man of wisdom. He explained to them what it was; a compound of all their 'opinions'.... [Likewise] each of the several religions emphasises one aspect of the Spirit...<sup>1</sup>

According to the moral of this story, seemingly contradictory religions can be partially true in that they describe the same thing in different ways. While this analogy may have some initial plausibility, it ought to be looked at more closely. For example, do we have any reason to think all religions *are* simultaneously true? Why think that all religions refer to the same object rather than different, or perhaps, nonexistent objects? This chapter will explore a variety of pluralist attempts to answer these questions. In the end, however, I will offer an opposing pluralist view that rejects the picture provided by this parable.

### **Preliminaries**

Recall that Critical Pluralism is the conjunction of the following four theses:

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<sup>1</sup> Bhagavan Das, *The Essential Unity of All Religions* (Wheaton, Ill: Theosophical Publishing House, 1969), 602.

CP1: No one religion is a full description of the truth.

CP2: No one religion *very closely* approximates the truth.

CP3: No *one* religion is substantially closer to the truth than *all* other religions.

CP4: *Some* major religions are substantially closer to the truth than *some* other major religions.

In the previous chapters, I have argued that CP1, CP2, and CP3 are more likely than their negations I1, I2, and I3. It is clear, though, that CP4 is different in kind from the first three. This last thesis is the negation of Egalitarian Pluralism (EP), the view that no major religion is substantially closer to the truth than any other major religion. Because Critical Pluralism is a middle position between inclusivism and Egalitarian Pluralism, it must defend itself against objections from both sides of the debate. In this chapter, I will argue that CP4 is more likely than EP.

Pluralism, generally speaking, is the view that more than one religion approximates the truth. On many pluralist accounts, all major religions approximate the truth. Hick, for instance, argues that all major religions are paths to the same goal.<sup>2</sup> This view lends itself naturally to EP, the view that all major religions are *roughly equal* approximations of the truth. Let us distinguish Egalitarian Pluralism from what Kevin Meeker calls “Anarchic Pluralism,” in the following way.<sup>3</sup> Egalitarian Pluralism claims that *all major* religions are about equally true while Anarchic Pluralism is the rather implausible view that *all* religions are about equally true.<sup>4</sup> The major obstacle for

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<sup>2</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 55.

<sup>3</sup> See Kevin Meeker, “Exclusivism, Pluralism, and Anarchy,” 528.

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 1 for my discussion of the implausibility of Anarchic Pluralism.

pluralists of either sort lies in accounting for the apparent contradictions found among religions.<sup>5</sup> If the Christian speaks of only one personal God and the Hindu speaks of many personal gods or one impersonal Brahman, how can it be that both of these religions are “equal approximations of the truth?”

Before assessing some of the answers to this question, we should first note a peripheral issue for the Egalitarian Pluralist. If one is to claim that all of the “major” religions are about equally true, some attempt must be given to specify precisely which religions are the “major” ones. As we have already seen, Hick specifically picks out the “moral” religions, or,

...the post-axial traditions, originating or rooted in the “axial age” of the first millennium B.C.E. – principally Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, Keith Ward identifies similarities among some major religions, separating for discussion, “The Semitic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam” and, “The Indian traditions of Vedanta and Buddhism.”<sup>7</sup> Peter Byrne speaks of “the major religions” but leaves the question of which religions are “major” open.<sup>8</sup> Later, however, he speaks of the, “wisdom behind Hick’s distinction between pre-Axial and post-Axial faiths for the purposes of presenting pluralism’s main theses.”<sup>9</sup> The idea between this distinction seems to be that the pre-Axial ethnic or tribal faiths were concerned largely with nature,

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<sup>5</sup> Often what we find in different religions are *contrary* accounts rather than *contradictory* accounts. For convenience, however, I will continue to speak of the “contradictions” among religions, using ‘contradiction’ in the looser colloquial sense.

<sup>6</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 55.

<sup>7</sup> Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 167.

<sup>8</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 73.

satisfying the gods by sacrifice, and the like, while the post-Axial faiths offer their believers some form of liberation or “ultimate good” that transcends the natural world.<sup>10</sup> Precisely which religions we count as “major” is not essential to the discussion here. Nonetheless, for the sake of convenience, we can certainly include the five mentioned by Hick (Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) and perhaps add Sikhism, Jainism, Taoism, or others. I will refer to this set of religions as “major” although I mean roughly the same thing that Hick means by the “moral” or “post-Axial” religions.

In what follows, I will examine some popular attempts to defend Egalitarian Pluralism despite the apparent contradictions found among the major religions. There are two main methods of defending Egalitarian Pluralism. According to the first version, the Common Core approach, the pluralist maintains that there is some “common core” that all religions share. In this way, all religions are true insofar as they share this core, although they may differ in other less important ways. The second version is the “Neo-Kantian” approach taken by John Hick. Hick explains away contradictory religious claims as disagreement about the *phenomenal* religious realm rather than about the *noumenal* “Real.” Given the relative importance of Hick’s view, I will spend considerable time addressing his version of pluralism in particular.

In addition to these two egalitarian approaches, there are other pluralists that I would classify as “non-egalitarian.” Broadly speaking, these pluralists take the “Aspectival Approach.” On this view, all religions are equal in their cognitive access to the divine reality. This view takes the parable of the blind men and the elephant to heart. It claims that all major religions are in contact with the divine but describe different

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<sup>10</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 73. See also Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 21-33.

aspects of it. These pluralists appear to remain agnostic concerning whether or not all major religions are about equally true.

I will argue that none of these solutions are satisfactory. Even the Aspectival Approach, though strictly non-egalitarian, does assert that the major religions “refer” to the divine or are otherwise “in contact” with it. As I will argue, however, we ought not even make this modified egalitarian claim. On my Critical Pluralist view, however, there will be no need to try to accommodate the contradictory views of all major religions. The Critical Pluralist maintains that, while no *one* major religion is significantly closer to the truth than *all* others, *some* are significantly closer than to *some* others. On this view, it would be perfectly acceptable if, for example, the monotheistic religions were all significantly closer to the truth than the polytheistic ones. There is no need to say they are “equally true,” nor is it necessary to maintain that all major religions have access to or refer to the divine. I will argue that Critical Pluralism is a better approach to religious diversity because it lacks the flaws that the other pluralist accounts have and yet preserves many of the benefits of these views.

### **The Common Core Approach**

As Christians from various sects differ on a number of issues, a Christian could argue that there is a “common core” among these various sects that unites them together: Jesus Christ is God Incarnate and died for the sins of humanity. A Christian, then, could claim that all Christian sects are roughly equal approximations of the truth. Although they differ on more peripheral issues, they all share the same common core. In the same way, the Common Core pluralist attempts to find a general core that all major religions share.

If such a core exists, the pluralist can argue that all major religions are equal approximations of the truth. They share the same core but differ on less important peripheral claims.

The Common Core approach is a very natural attempt to find similarity among different claims. If we return to the Witness Case for a moment, a very common response to hearing contrary testimony of the same incident is to look for “something minimal that is confirmed by all.”<sup>11</sup> Two witnesses may differ on the height and weight of the criminal they saw, but they may agree that he was a white man with a scar on his left cheek. As in the Witness Case, if we can find some claims that all religions share, it becomes *prima facie* much more likely that these claims are true. Peter Clarke and Peter Byrne call the Common Core approach “essentialism.” For an essentialist, the search is not simply for some generic commonalities that may be found in a definition of religion, but for the very *essence* of all religions:

They will therefore tend to understand the relation between the underlying core of religion and the outward characteristics of religions on the model of ‘essence and manifestation.’ Behind all religions lies a shared essence. There are different religions because this essence is manifested in different historical and social circumstances.... The essence of religion is thus its true nature, in that the features of this essence are unvarying in all religions, underlie all other features and are capable of explaining all else in religion.<sup>12</sup>

According to the Common Core approach, then, if we were to find commonality among all major religions, we could be confident that this core is the “true nature” or essence of all religion.

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<sup>11</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 127-8.

<sup>12</sup> Clark and Byrne, 17.

Finding such an essence of religion, however, is challenging to say the least. Even extremely generic candidates for a common core such as “belief in spiritual things”<sup>13</sup> are inadequate to account for non-theistic religions such as some forms of Buddhism. Even if all religions do believe in “spiritual things” in some very loose sense, it is not clear that belief in such things is *central* to all religions.<sup>14</sup> And, even if such a belief were central to all religions, it is so general in nature that it hardly seems to constitute the *essence* of religion. The attempt to find a core belief all religions share seems to run into a dilemma. The more we thin out our putative core belief in order to find one that applies to all major religions, the less it appears to be the very “heart” of religion. But in the quest for finding a rich essence of religion, we risk not having a belief that plays a central role in all major religions. Clearly “belief in something spiritual” is too vague to constitute the true nature or heart of religion. But, on the other hand, “belief in a creator who wants to have a personal relationship with us” is too robust to apply to all major religions. The attempt to find some set of beliefs to play the role of the common core, then, is unlikely to meet with success.

A more promising attempt to find the core of religion is to examine mystical experience. One well-known attempt to do this is found in Rudolf Otto. In *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto describes the universal experience of *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans* in encountering the holy, or “numinous.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, on his view, this experience is the

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<sup>13</sup> Clarke and Byrne, 6. See also E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (London: Murray, 1903), 424.

<sup>14</sup> Clarke and Byrne, 23.

<sup>15</sup> See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. J.W. Harvey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958). *Mysterium, tremendum et fascinans* is typically translated as “fearful and fascinating mystery.”

core of religion.<sup>16</sup> In a similar way, William James famously cites four marks by which religious experience can be identified: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity.<sup>17</sup> James, however, denies the existence of an essence of religion.<sup>18</sup> Following James, however, one could argue that experiences with these four qualities form the essence or true nature of all religion.

Such an attempt, however, will inevitably be flawed. While Otto and James are correct that some characteristics found in mystical experience are found across various cultures, this is not to say that such experience is the *essence* of religion. Mystical experience may form the core of some religions, but may only be of marginal importance in others. Indeed, many religious people have never had a mystical experience nor seek one. To dwell on the similarities in mystical experiences alone is to ignore the vast differences among religions on other important and more central matters. Thus, it is hard to imagine that similarity in mystical experience, though common, constitutes the *core* of all religion

Another area where one is likely to find similarities among the major religions is ethics. Although John Hick ultimately does not take the Common Core approach to pluralism, he notes the wide acceptance across traditions of ethical precepts similar to the Golden Rule:

The answer, I suggest, is that at the level of their most basic moral insights the great traditions use a common criterion. For they agree in giving a central and normative role to the unselfish regard for others that we call

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<sup>16</sup> Otto, 6.

<sup>17</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 302-3.

<sup>18</sup> James, 30.

love or compassion. This is commonly expressed in the principle of valuing others as we value ourselves, and treating them accordingly.<sup>19</sup>

It is not difficult to find variations of the Golden Rule across cultures. Hick himself provides a detailed catalog of such variations.<sup>20</sup> Once one identifies this commonality, it is not a far cry from this “common morality” to the claim that ethics is the core of all religion. An ambitious theologian, then, may downplay the various differences among religions and promote their similarities, such as those found in ethical precepts.

Indeed, Bhagavan Das in his book, *The Essential Unity of All Religions* takes precisely this approach. Originally published in 1932, this work is a compilation of scriptures from various traditions supplemented by commentary highlighting their similarities as evidence of one “Universal Religion.” Das is a full-fledged disciple of the Common Core approach. On his view, there is enough commonality among religions to isolate it as the essence of religion and simply ignore the differences between religious claims.

[W]hat varies with each [religion], deserves to be regarded as of the surface, as *non-Essential*, and what runs through and is common to all, to be regarded as of the core and the Essence; and that, therefore, the essential points, on which all religions agree, should... be regarded as the very heart of all religions, as the very core of the Truth; on the ‘democratic principle’ of ‘majority vote’; and for the very important and truly practical purpose of promoting mutual Good Understanding and Peace all over the earth.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 56.

<sup>20</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 56-7.

<sup>21</sup> Das, xiii-xiv.

Das, like Hick, finds that the Golden Rule “is to be found in the Scriptures of all religions.”<sup>22</sup> He goes further, however, arguing that this ethical precept is evidence of a more subtle religious truth:

The Golden Rule is the direct outcome, or complementary aspect, of the Ultimate Spiritual Truth of truths. Why should I do unto others as I would be done by? Because ‘I’ and ‘others’ are all One I, One Universal Self; because, therefore, what I do to others I do to myself...<sup>23</sup>

For Das, then, not only do ethics form the common core of religion, but these ethical claims also imply further metaphysical claims that are part of this common core as well.

The idea that ethical precepts such as the Golden Rule truly form the core of all religions, however, is without merit. Hardly any Christians, Muslims, or Buddhists would agree that the Golden Rule is the essence of their faith. If there were nothing more to the “essence” of Christianity than the Golden Rule, the atheist may “in essence” believe the same thing as the Christian. To boil down religious belief to such a claim is to eliminate nearly all of the substance of the religion. Das’s further metaphysical claim, moreover, that “I” and “others” are part of the “One Universal Self,” is so far from being a universally held belief that hardly any religion will affirm it. While Das aims to find what is common in all religions, he ultimately arrives at something that few, if any, religions share. His “Universal Religion” appears to be more of a religion he constructs from his favorite parts of different religions rather than the essential core of each existing religion.

The Common Core approach has little going for it. There is very little hope of finding a single essence common to all religions. Indeed, the quest to do so is often the

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<sup>22</sup> Das, 297.

<sup>23</sup> Das, 306.

result of social or politically motivated thought rather than a serious philosophically defensible position. Those who find themselves tired of the disagreement and fighting between religious groups may look for commonality among them in order to appease both parties and bring peace.<sup>24</sup> Das himself admits as much when he discusses what his goal is in searching for the core of all religions:

...the very important and truly practical purpose of promoting mutual Good Understanding and Peace all over the earth.<sup>25</sup>

While for practical reasons it would be nice if it turned out that all religions were “in essence” the same, these are not reasons for thinking that there *actually is* a common essence in religion. Although many similarities can be found among major religious traditions, one ought not overemphasize these similarities and ignore the differences simply for the purpose of making people get along.

Radical views such as what we find in Das are rare among contemporary Western philosophers. As Byrne points out, the Common Core approach, or the “essentialist” position, is largely used as a straw man:

Essentialism is in part a fictional position invented in debates about the character of religion. It is a straw man set up for refutation.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, essentialism is often invoked more as a criticism of pluralism than as an authentic position. The pluralist, since she maintains that more than one religion is true, is often accused of being an essentialist.<sup>27</sup> According to Paul Morris, for example, pluralism is

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<sup>24</sup> What other reason, other than to appease the most people, would “majority vote” be the best method for assessing truth?

<sup>25</sup> Das, xiii-xiv.

<sup>26</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 59.

<sup>27</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 9-10.

self-contradictory because it claims to favor tolerance and equality for all religions but actually supports a view of its own that rejects the claims of all religions.<sup>28</sup> Although Morris may be correct in criticizing the Common Core approach, it should be noted that this is not the only, or even the most common type of pluralism. Admitting the failure of the Common Core approach, let us turn now to Hick's "Neo-Kantian" version of Egalitarian Pluralism.

### **The "Neo-Kantian" Approach**

In the previous chapter, I discussed Hick's argument for the claim that all major religions are "vehicles of truth." This argument centers on the claim that all major religions seem to offer a similar goal, that of "the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to a new orientation, centered in the divine Reality."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, since there appears to be no significant difference between the number of saints produced in each religion, Hick argues that all major religions are "more or less equally authentic human awarenesses of and response to the Ultimate."<sup>30</sup> But, how can the contradictory accounts found in the major religions all be equally valid?

Hick has a ready solution:

For we are familiar today with the ways in which human experience is partly formed by the conceptual and linguistic frameworks within which it occurs. The basically Kantian insight that the mind is active in

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<sup>28</sup> See Paul Morris "Judaism and Pluralism: the Price of 'Religious Freedom,'" in *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief*, ed. I. Hamnet, (London: Routledge, 1990), 179-201.

<sup>29</sup> Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 55.

<sup>30</sup> Hick, "A Pluralist View," 44-5.

perception... can now be extended with some confidence to the analysis of religious awareness.<sup>31</sup>

Although the Christian's claim that God is personal and triune is incompatible with the Hindu claim that God, or *Brahman*, is impersonal and is manifested in the form of many gods, we can think of these claims as simply various "conceptual frameworks" that do not accurately describe what exists. Hick does not claim that religious beliefs are *merely* the product of conceptual frameworks, however. Rather, he claims that there is some reality that both the Christian and Hindu conceptual schemes point toward. Both the Christian God and the Hindu *Brahman* are different conceptions of the same "ultimate transcendent divine reality" that Hick calls "The Real."<sup>32</sup> This distinction between conceptual schemes and the Real can also be put into the Kantian language of phenomena and noumena:

In Kantian terms, the divine noumenon, the Real *an sich*, is experienced through different human receptivities as a range of divine phenomena, in the formation of which religious concepts have played an essential part.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, different religions provide different "lenses" through which one experiences the Real. One cannot experience the Real directly.

On Hick's view, however, the Real remains utterly ineffable. What we experience of the Real, its goodness for example, is merely one way of conceptualizing the Real. It is not an aspect of the Real *an sich*. What, then, can one say about the Real? According to Hick, the Real is "beyond the scope of our human concepts, cannot be directly experienced by us as it is in itself but only as it appears through our various

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<sup>31</sup> Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 59.

<sup>32</sup> Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 59.

<sup>33</sup> Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 59.

human thought-forms.”<sup>34</sup> The Real *an sich* is not good, nor personal, nor even impersonal. It transcends all of these categories. For Hick, the transcendence of the Real allows him to explain how the parable of the blind men and the elephant applies to religious disagreement. Seemingly contradictory propositions can disagree on the level of phenomena although they may still refer to the same noumenal Real. In this way, he can accommodate disagreement and yet maintain the Egalitarian Pluralist view that all religions are about equally true.

### *Is the Real Necessary?*

Although there is certainly not room to discuss all of the objections to Hick’s pluralism here, I would like to address some of the more important ones.<sup>35</sup> Paul Eddy, for one, maintains that the noumenal Real is an unnecessary postulate. According to Hick, experiencing the Real as, say, Jesus Christ, would be a culturally conceptualized experience of the ineffable noumenal Real. But if this is correct, the noumenal Real does not provide any of the content of the religious experience. It is fully accounted for by the culturally conditioned phenomena.<sup>36</sup> Since the Real *an sich* is so wholly other that none of our concepts apply to it, it seems that there is no way for the Real to supply any of the content of religious experience. If it did provide content, that content would have to be in the form of a humanly accessible, conceptual, understanding of the divine. But, this is

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<sup>34</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 59.

<sup>35</sup> For discussion of the interesting accusation that Hick is a polytheist, see George Mavrodes, “Polytheism,” in *Religious Diversity*, 140-142. Also see, for a criticism of Hick’s account of religious experience, Keith Ward, “Truth and the Diversity of Religions,” in *Religious Diversity*, 109-125; and George A. Netland, “Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism,” *Religious Studies* 22 (1986): 249-61.

<sup>36</sup> Paul R. Eddy, “Religious Pluralism and the Divine: Another Look at John Hick’s Neo-Kantian Proposal” in *Religious Diversity*, 134-6.

precisely what Hick denies can be provided by the Real *an sich*. Eddy ultimately concludes that, “the noumenal Real in Hick’s system is rendered a purely unnecessary and unjustifiable construct.”<sup>37</sup>

Hick retorts that the noumenal Real plays a vital role, the role of being the source of the “givenness” of religious experience.<sup>38</sup> On Hick’s view, then, it is not necessary that the Real provide *conceptual* content, only that it, “impact upon the human spirit.” Once it does so, it will take the form of experience that is supplied by the conceptual apparatus of the experiencer. But Eddy seems to right. If the Real is so removed from us, it is hard to see what the “givenness” of the Real entails. Typically, a “givenness” includes a “given.” But what is given in this case? Because the conceptual framework of the experiencer provides the conceptual content of religious experience, it seems that the noumenal Real does not provide any “given” at all. Suppose a Christian has a religious experience of Jesus appearing at her bedside. How is this experience caused by the “givenness” of the Real? If the conceptual framework of the Christian is responsible for the content of the Jesus appearance, Eddy is right. The noumenal Real plays no determining role in the experience whatsoever. Religious experiences are simply constructions of our own conceptual apparatus. The noumenal Real, it seems, is an unnecessary hypothesis.

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<sup>37</sup> Eddy, 136.

<sup>38</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and the Divine: A Response to Paul Eddy,” *Religious Studies* 31 (1995): 419.

### *Formal and Substantial Properties*

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of Hick's view is his claim that the Real *an sich* transcends human categories. If the Real transcended *all* human categories, then it would not even have the property of existence or the property of being the Real *an sich*. It certainly seems that Hick *has* to allow for the Real to have these kinds of properties. Indeed, he does acknowledge this problem. His solution is to make a distinction between what he calls "formal" and "substantial" properties. That "formal or logical" properties, such as "being the Real *an sich*," apply to the Real cannot be denied. If the Real did not possess even these properties, we would not be able to refer to it at all.<sup>39</sup> But, these "logical generated properties" in no way attribute something *substantial* to the Real such as personality, benevolence, or the like. But, what exactly the distinction is between "substantial" and "formal" properties is unclear. Note, however, that the nature of substantial properties is key to Hick's Neo-Kantian pluralism. Without a transcendent Real lacking substantial properties, Hick cannot account for the various contradictions among religious claims. But for precisely this reason, Hick's formal/substantial distinction has been the subject of much criticism.<sup>40</sup>

Hick argues that the doctrine of the ineffability of the divine has a rich tradition, known to the medievals as the *via negativa*. On his view, this ineffability is only intended to apply to the substantial properties of God. While we can attribute *negative* properties to God, e.g. he is not finite, we cannot make positive claims about what God is

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<sup>39</sup> Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 60.

<sup>40</sup> For a sampling of such criticism, see William Rowe, "Religious Pluralism," *Religious Studies* 35 (1999): 139-150; and Keith Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions," in *Religious Diversity*, 109-125.

in himself.<sup>41</sup> But, Hick never really tells us what he means by “positive claims” about the Real. How is it that we can know what God is not (e.g. finite), but we cannot know what God is (e.g. infinite)? The most Hick does to clarify this vague distinction is to give examples. The properties of being personal, good, all-powerful, etc. are positive or substantial properties that cannot be predicated of the Real.<sup>42</sup> The properties of “being a referent of a term,” and “being such that our substantial concepts do not apply” are mere “logical pedantries” and are considered negative or formal properties.<sup>43</sup> But, without a definition of formal or substantial, we are left to guess what other characteristics would fit in these categories.

Hick does provide a subtle clue, however, that clarifies the formal/substantial distinction. It is not found in his major work *An Interpretation of Religion*, but in a footnote in a later article. Speaking of this distinction, Hick says:

...possibly William Alston’s terminology is to be preferred when he distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic attributes...<sup>44</sup>

Alston’s discussion of extrinsic and intrinsic attributes is in relation to religious language. In asking whether any predicate can be literally true of God, Alston distinguishes those “extrinsic” predicates that can be literally applied to God and those “intrinsic” properties that are up for debate. His explanation of these terms is brief however:

The reason various predicates are obvious examples of “negative” or “extrinsic” predicates is that they do not “tell us anything” about the subject – about the nature or operations of the subject. Let us call

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<sup>41</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

<sup>42</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

<sup>43</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

<sup>44</sup> Hick, “Religious Pluralism and the Divine: A Response to Paul Eddy,” footnote 4, 418.

predicates that do “tell us something” about such matters “intrinsic” predicates.<sup>45</sup>

Now, certainly this does not give anything near the precise definition we are looking for, but it does give us a start. Beyond this definition, Alston only says that it is “notoriously difficult” to draw a distinct line between extrinsic and intrinsic properties.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, Alston’s definition may allow us to sort out the various predicates into the formal and substantial.

Presumably, extrinsic properties do not “tell us anything” about the subject in the same way that ‘existence’ does not add anything to the concept of a thing. If we know what a bird is, and we say further that a bird exists, the existence predicate does not “tell us anything” about what the bird is like. In the same way, if I say that the Real is “that which I am talking about right now,” I have not said anything about what the Real is in itself, only that it is what I am talking about. Alston’s account seems to let us sort some of the predicates that Hick mentioned into the appropriate categories. Clearly, to attribute to the Real the properties of “being good,” “being all-knowing,” etc., would be to tell us a great deal about what the Real is. These are intrinsic properties on Alston’s account. Moreover, “being the referent of a term” and “being such that it is identical to itself” are formal properties that tell us nothing about what the Real is itself.

Even if we make the formal/substantial distinction in the way Hick prefers, however, it fails to accomplish everything that he wants it to. Ultimately, he wants it to be the case that what the Real is in itself is completely ineffable. In order to do this, he

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<sup>45</sup> William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 40.

<sup>46</sup> Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language*, 40.

needs to classify all of the properties that *can* be attributed to the Real as merely formal properties. But this project fails. Take the following predicate:

1. Being such that no substantial concepts apply.

Hick asserts both that 1 can be predicated of the Real *and* that it is a formal property, a mere logical pedantry. But this is not the case. 1 *does* tell us something about what the Real is like. It tells us that the Real is not like anything that we are familiar with in our experience, that it is neither personal nor impersonal, neither good nor bad, neither powerful nor impotent. The Real is a very unusual thing. This seems to be something about the Real *an sich*. Of course Hick denies this. He would argue that it is just another way of knowing something negative about the Real, something about what the Real is not. Perhaps this is where we run into the vagaries of the extrinsic/intrinsic distinction that Alston mentions.

For the sake of the argument, then, let us grant that 1 cannot be predicated of the Real *an sich*. Even if we grant this, further difficulties await Hick. Christopher Insole takes note of the many predicates Hick ascribes to the Real in *An Interpretation of Religion* and argues that they cannot all be formal properties. For example, Hick attributes the following predicates to the Real:

2. Being “such as to be authentically experienced as a range of both theistic and non-theistic phenomenon.”<sup>47</sup>
3. Being “the noumenal ground” of different religious experiences.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 246-7.

<sup>48</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 247.

Insole argues that these predicates must be substantial.<sup>49</sup> Not only do these tell us quite a bit about what the Real is like, they are as informative as other claims that Hick calls substantial. According to Hick, 2 and 3 as formal properties. But, according to Insole,

...if the class of 'purely formal statements' is so wide and permissive, I can see no reason to exclude properties such as 'being good' and 'being exclusively revealed in Christ'. After all the difference between 'being authentically revealed in different human religious experiences' and 'being exclusively revealed in Christ' seems not to be about the difference between formal and substantial statements...<sup>50</sup>

Although Hick excludes any substantial predicates from being attributed to the Real *an sich*, it seems that he sneaks some of his own in the back door. Certainly, Hick would label the predicates "God is omnipotent" and "God is incarnate in Jesus Christ" as *substantial* properties. But, as Insole notes, Hick's own assertions are not different in kind. As Insole argues, Hick's claim that the Real is the "noumenal ground" of various religious experiences is no more formal or "merely logical" than the Christian's substantial claims.

Ultimately, Hick's formal/substantial distinction simply does not hold up. On his view, it is vital that there be an ineffable divine Reality. It is this ineffability that allows him to avoid the obvious problem for pluralists that different religions make apparently contradictory truth claims. While the Real might be partially ineffable in that no human can *fully* comprehend its nature, it seems that Hick's stronger claim that no substantial predicates are applicable to the Real is too bold. In addition to the problematic

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<sup>49</sup> Christopher J. Insole, "Why John Hick Cannot, and Should Not, Stay Out of the Jam Pot," *Religious Studies* 36 (2000): 25-33.

<sup>50</sup> Insole, 27.

formal/substantial distinction, however, the concept of the *noumenal* Real itself raises other difficulties for Hick's view.

*The Possibility of a Real Without Properties*

In order for the source of all major religions to be identical, the Real must transcend the substantial properties that various religions attribute to it. It cannot be personal or impersonal, good or evil, temporal or atemporal. The Real cannot be personal, or else those religions that think of the divine as impersonal are confused about religious matters and are inferior to those that hold the opposite. For the same reason, the Real cannot be impersonal. If all of the major religions are more or less equal paths to the Real, the Real must have neither of these two properties, the Real *an sich* must be what Hick calls "non-dual," transcending each pair of contrary properties.

The concept of a non-dual Real that transcends all substantial properties, however, is subject to the charge of logical incoherence. According to William Rowe, non-dual properties such as "being neither personal nor impersonal" cannot apply to the Real because such properties cannot be properly predicated of *any* object.<sup>51</sup> Hick argues that the Real is neither personal nor impersonal because it is not the type of thing that *could* be personal or impersonal.<sup>52</sup> Rowe, however, challenges this claim by distinguishing between pairs of contraries and pairs of contradictories.<sup>53</sup> Contraries, like hot and cold are not exhaustive. There may be some things that are neither hot nor cold.

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<sup>51</sup> William Rowe, "Religious Pluralism," *Religious Studies* 35 (1999): 139-150.

<sup>52</sup> John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism*, (London: SCM Press, 1995), 61.

<sup>53</sup> Rowe, "Religious Pluralism," 147.

But pairs of contradictories such as hot and non-hot, on the other hand, exhaust the logical space. All things are such that they must be placed in one of the two categories.<sup>54</sup> Suppose there are some things about which we might say “the properties of hot and cold do not apply.” The number two is one such thing. It would be a category mistake to ask “Is two hot or cold?” Nonetheless, if two is neither hot nor cold, it certainly is non-hot and non-cold.<sup>55</sup> In the case of the noumenal Real, then, it is clear that if the Real is *not* personal, it is *non*-personal. If it is not temporal, it is *non*-temporal.

Hick would protest at this point. He would claim that the Real is not temporal, nor is the Real non-temporal. On his view, these human categories do not apply at all to the Real.

[W]e have reason to think that these concepts do not apply to [the Real] – namely, as I pointed out just now that if they did it would have mutually contradictory attributes, such as being personal and being non-personal, being a creator and not being a creator and so.... you must postulate a reality to which these conceptual dualisms do not apply...<sup>56</sup>

According to Rowe, however, Hick’s admission that the Real does not have either of two contradictory properties shows that the Real is not *anything at all*:

My own answer is that there is no reality designated by Hick’s expression ‘the Real.’ I say this because Hick takes it to be a necessary feature of the Real in itself that it does not have the property of being personal. That is, he thinks it is true that the Real in itself is not personal. But if it is true that the Real in itself is not personal, it is exceedingly difficult to deny, as Hick does, that the Real is non-personal. Indeed, I take it to be a *necessary truth*, if not a truth of logic, that whatever is real is either personal or non-personal.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Rowe, “Religious Pluralism,” 147.

<sup>55</sup> Rowe, “Religious Pluralism,” 147.

<sup>56</sup> Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 64.

<sup>57</sup> Rowe, “Religious Pluralism,” 150. Emphasis added.

If we follow the Principle of Excluded Middle, we must admit that for all X, X is either personal or it is *not the case* that X is personal, i.e. X is non-personal. Hick must insist that Excluded Middle does not apply to the Real *an sich*. But this would be to deny a necessary truth and thus cannot possibly be true.

It is necessary for Hick's Neo-Kantian project that the Real be a transcendent object beyond the various conceptual understandings of the divine found in various religions. But, if we accept Rowe's criticism that it is a necessary truth that all things have one or the other of contradictory pairs of properties, there *can be no such thing* as the noumenal Real. Hick's Neo-Kantian system is a creative way to apply the parable of the blind men and the elephant to the case of religious disagreement. But, in describing an "elephant" that does not favor the view of one blind man over another, Hick posits an elephant that cannot possibly exist. His attempt to sketch an Egalitarian Pluralist theory on Neo-Kantian grounds, though creative, is unsuccessful.

### **The Aspectival Approach**

Up to this point, we have examined two ways to spell out the egalitarian thesis that no major religion is substantially closer to the truth than any other major religion. The Common Core approach sought to find some *essence* shared by all religions. Because nonessential claims are less important than essential claims, the Common Core approach can preserve the egalitarian view despite surface disagreements between religions. In the wake of the general failure of the Common Core approach, Hick attempts to explain away the apparent inconsistencies among religions by appealing to the Kantian

distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena*. This approach fails as well, largely because of the questionable character of the *noumenal* Real.

The Aspectival Approach, however, does not attempt to defend an egalitarian position at all. Rather than deny that the divine has substantial properties, the Aspectival Pluralist argues that religions are merely partial attempts at describing the same thing. Although all religions may not be equally true, different religions describe different aspects of God much in the same way that the blind men describe the elephant. Because the Aspectival Approach is more modest in character and does not try to defend Egalitarian Pluralism, it provides a much more plausible option for the pluralist. As I will argue, however, this approach makes unnecessary claims as well.

In his *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism*, Peter Byrne sets forth an Aspectival view whereby religions are, “connected, overlapping attempts on the part of human beings to understand and orient themselves toward the sacred.”<sup>58</sup> He identifies three theses that constitute his brand of pluralism, the first of which is our primary interest:

(1) All major religious traditions are equal in respect of making common reference to a single transcendent, sacred reality. (2) All major traditions are likewise equal in respect of offering some means or other to human salvation. (3) All traditions are to be seen as containing revisable, limited accounts of the nature of the sacred: none is certain enough in its particular dogmatic formulations to provide the norm for interpreting the others.<sup>59</sup>

While all major religions are not necessarily equal in terms of approximating the truth, they are equal in that (1) they all offer a route to salvation and (2) they all *refer to the same thing*.

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<sup>58</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 13.

<sup>59</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 12.

Already at this point, we may wonder how such a project even gets off the ground. How can it be that the polytheist and monotheist describe the “same thing” in different ways? How can the divine appear to be manifold in one aspect and singular in another?<sup>60</sup> We can understand how an elephant can seem like a snake or a winnowing-fan at the same time because it has different parts, but how can the divine appear personal and impersonal at the same time? Is the divine part personal and part impersonal? Byrne has a ready response. Making use of causal theories of reference, he argues that incompatible descriptions of the divine can co-refer even if they do not accurately describe the object of reference.<sup>61</sup> Simply put, one need not have the correct description of a thing in order to properly refer to it. Suppose that you and I are sitting on a park bench and I turn to you and say, “That man in the pink shirt is looking at us.” You look at the bench next to us and there is a man looking at us wearing a shirt that appears to be pink. Let us further suppose, however, that the man is not wearing a pink shirt at all, but a red and white checkered shirt that simply appears pink from a distance. It certainly appears that I have properly referred to the man on the other bench despite the fact that my description of him is inaccurate.

According to Byrne, reference can be maintained even by two *incompatible* descriptions:

At earlier stages of atomic theory atoms may have been believed to be physically indivisible. Modern atomic theory now contradicts this assumption. But some earlier theories may yet be referring to what are

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<sup>60</sup> Byrne avoids this objection, though other pluralists do not, by singling out only monist conceptions of the divine, “the ontologically, valuatively and rationally ultimate reality.” This does not resolve other sorts of disagreements such as between personal and impersonal accounts of the divine. See Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 51-2.

<sup>61</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 31-4.

now styled ‘atoms’ nonetheless... This point will even survive recognition that an early theory may have regarded a description such as ‘physically indivisible’ as an essential or definitional truth about atoms.<sup>62</sup>

If incompatible descriptions can properly refer to the same thing, it is quite simple to see how a causal theory of reference can help understand religious disagreement. Although the Hindu describes *Brahman* as impersonal and the Christian describes God as personal, they may both refer to the same divine reality despite the fact that their descriptions are incompatible. One of these descriptions may be right and the other wrong, or both may be incorrect. Nonetheless, it is possible that religious disagreement is merely the result of different incompatible and often incorrect ways of describing the same thing.

In contrast to the Common Core and Neo-Kantian approaches, Byrne’s Aspectival Account has at least prima facie plausibility. It seems to provide a possible route the pluralist can use to account for disagreement and hang onto the claim that many religions approximate the truth. One of the benefits of the view is that it allows the major religions to have a common referent without implying Egalitarianism.<sup>63</sup> The remaining question, then, is whether there is good evidence for thinking that all major religions *do* refer to the same thing. In order to answer this question according to a causal account of reference, we need to ask whether each religion has the right kind of causal connection to the putative referent. Byrne uses Halley’s comet as an example:

Let us suppose we have a unique object such as Halley’s Comet. English speakers refer to it via that name. But it will have manifested itself in many localities and to many cultures and so have other names in different languages. All these names are names for the same thing *if causal*

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<sup>62</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 32.

<sup>63</sup> See Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 163.

*connections of the right kind* trace each of these names back to one and the same object.<sup>64</sup>

But what evidence do we have that each religion's language about the transcendent has the right sort of causal connections? Byrne admits that we lack any *direct* evidence of this.<sup>65</sup> The best we can do is, "resting upon the demands of intellectual economy and charity" indirectly infer causal connections to the same referent, "provided we find similarities in important material practices and not too dissimilar classifications of sacred focus."<sup>66</sup>

It is here, however, that T.J. Mawson criticizes Byrne's common reference thesis. Mawson agrees that there is no direct historical evidence that religious language originated with the right kind of causal connections.<sup>67</sup> Indirect support for this causal claim, according to Mawson, is nearly as difficult to find. Examining the history of religions, we find that, among even the earliest adherents of the religions of the world, there is already a great degree of disagreement concerning "material practices" and "classifications of sacred focus."<sup>68</sup> There simply is not the kind of inductive evidence necessary to support the view that religious language at the earliest points of recorded history had a common referent. And if this is the case, we have no particular reason

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<sup>64</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 45-6. Emphasis added.

<sup>65</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 46.

<sup>66</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 52.

<sup>67</sup> T.J. Mawson, "'Byrne's' Religious Pluralism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58 (2005): 40.

<sup>68</sup> Mawson, 43.

(other than economy and charity) to assume that *before that*, i.e. in pre-history, there was the right kind of causal connections.<sup>69</sup>

To be fair, Byrne admits that his *Prolegomena* is only an attempt to provide a mere, “initial outline of pluralism” that provides, “a plausible way of looking at the religions” rather than a view that demands, “categorical affirmation.”<sup>70</sup> The fact that adequate support for his common reference thesis is unlikely to be forthcoming, however, makes one wonder whether a sufficient defense of Byrne’s common reference thesis is nothing more than a promissory note. We can agree with Byrne that, if we appeal to a causal theory of reference, it is *possible* that all major religions refer to the same object. But lacking evidence that there are the proper causal connections from religious language to a common referent, we ought to assert nothing more than its mere possibility.

Keith Ward tries to defend the Aspectival Approach in a slightly different way. Rather than using the mechanism of causal theories of reference, however, Ward appeals to religious metaphor. When the Christian speaks of having a relationship with a personal God, for example, Ward suggests that this is “an analogy to try to capture, very inadequately, something of the character of an indescribable experience in worship and prayer.”<sup>71</sup> If we view religious language as metaphorical rather than literal, we can also account for disagreement among religions:

The more we stress the inadequacy of our descriptions, the more we allow that our inadequate descriptions may capture other aspects of the human relation to supreme reality.... It is not that all these views can be true – they cannot, taken just as they stand. It is not that they are equally good –

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<sup>69</sup> Mawson, 43.

<sup>70</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 109.

<sup>71</sup> Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 199.

how could we be sure of that without having some super-view in the light of which we could assess them? It is only that they may not be as contradictory as it might appear...<sup>72</sup>

If religious language is taken as non-literal, incompatible descriptions may describe the same object in much the same way that two dramatically different poems may describe the same sunset.

Ward goes further, however, by developing a new type of pluralism he calls “convergent pluralism.”<sup>73</sup> According to this view, religions provide imperfect and metaphorical descriptions of the same object, but are capable of converging on the truth through a type of evolution, “a process of dialectical interpenetration,” brought about by interaction and dialogue with one another:<sup>74</sup>

A truly convergent spirituality will seek to work within and between traditions, bringing them closer together while transforming them through that interaction. In the long term, I believe this is the way religious belief will develop in the third millennium.<sup>75</sup>

While Ward rejects Egalitarian Pluralism, he espouses a highly metaphorical interpretation of religious claims and an excessive optimism about religion’s long-term prospects at converging on the truth. As I will argue in the next section, Byrne and Ward are both right not to tie their views to Egalitarian Pluralism. Nonetheless, their pluralist views run into trouble when they make unnecessary further speculations such as Byrne’s common reference thesis and Ward’s “convergence on truth” claim. Critical Pluralism,

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<sup>72</sup> Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 199.

<sup>73</sup> Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 175.

<sup>74</sup> Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 176.

<sup>75</sup> Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 204-5.

instead, offers a version of pluralism that avoids the troubling implications of Egalitarian Pluralism as well as Byrne and Ward's unnecessary speculations.

### **The Critical Pluralist Approach**

In the previous sections, we have discussed some of the flaws with Egalitarian Pluralism. The Common Core approach can be dismissed easily because there does not appear to be a single *essence* of all religions. To argue for a Common Core in the face of such insurmountable difficulty, it seems, is to try to save Egalitarian Pluralism at all costs. At the same time, however, Hick also takes great pains to preserve egalitarianism. He is extremely careful not to attribute any properties to the Real that will tip the scales in favor of one religion rather than another. For example, if the Real were personal, that would mean those religions that spoke of an impersonal Absolute were on the wrong track. For this reason, he must deny that *any* substantial properties apply to the Real. That way the scales are not tipped one way or the other.

Given the rather extreme lengths Hick goes to in order to preserve Egalitarian Pluralism, one might naturally wonder what reason there is to preserve Egalitarian Pluralism at all. Why should we take care to avoid tipping the scales? Why believe that all major religions are, to use Hick's phrase, "more or less equally authentic human awarenesses of and response to the Ultimate"?<sup>76</sup> In what follows I will argue that there is good reason *not to believe* this egalitarian view. Thus, the pluralist need not go through such trouble to preserve it.

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<sup>76</sup> Hick, "A Pluralist View," 45.

The view I defend, Critical Pluralism, differs from the pluralist positions already discussed in this chapter. Pluralism, generally speaking, is the view that more than one religion approximates the truth.<sup>77</sup> As we have seen, however, pluralists often assert either that all major religions approximate the truth to a roughly equal degree (Egalitarian Pluralism) or that they are equal in some other way such as in referring to the same thing (the Aspectival Approach). As all pluralists recognize, it would be a mistake to think that every religion approximates the truth (Anarchic Pluralism). This would be to put an inappropriate amount of credence in religions invented by egomaniacal leaders, for example. Thus, if we want to claim that more than one religion approximates the truth, we must also limit the amount of religions that do.

Most pluralists single out the “major religions” as the set of religions that approximate the truth. But, there are certainly a number of other viable options. Perhaps two religions are approximately true and the rest are far from the truth. Or rather, it could be the case that all religions other than those created by egomaniacal leaders are approximately true. Critical Pluralism is minimalist in some ways. It does not attach itself to any of these specific options. It is pluralist in that it asserts that more than one religion is true, but it differs from other pluralist positions, however, in making the following unique claim:

CP4: Some major religions are substantially closer to the truth than some other major religions.

As this is simply the negation of Egalitarian Pluralism, my argument for the likelihood of CP4 is in effect an argument against the likelihood of Egalitarian Pluralism. In what

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<sup>77</sup> For a thorough discussion of the distinction between pluralism and other positions regarding religious diversity, see Chapter 1.

follows, I will provide two major reasons to think that Critical Pluralism is the more likely position of the two. Moreover, I will demonstrate that Critical Pluralism avoids the unnecessary speculations of both Egalitarian Pluralism and the Aspectival Approach while losing none of the explanatory benefits these views enjoy.

### *Egalitarian Pluralism Unlikely A Priori*

Although one may admit the general failure of the Common Core and Neo-Kantian approaches, it is certainly possible to defend Egalitarian Pluralism in some other way. Perhaps, it just happens to turn out as a matter of contingent fact that all of the major religions are just about equally true. They all contain some falsehoods, of course, but perhaps the falsehoods are distributed about equally among the major traditions. Do we have any reason to think this is the case? It seems, instead, that we have good reason to doubt the Egalitarian Pluralist thesis. According to Keith Yandell, the egalitarian view requires a great deal of argument that has never been provided. Simply put, Egalitarian Pluralism,

...comes with the price of showing that all religions are epistemically tied – that the truth-favoring considerations on behalf of any two religions R1 and R2, whichever two you happen to select, are even; so are the considerations against the truth of R1 and R2, which religions these may be. Showing anything like that would take a tremendous amount of work, and there seems to be nothing even vaguely resembling a set of massive volumes in which any such thing is argued for.<sup>78</sup>

Thus, even if one could construct an Egalitarian Pluralist theory that avoided the problems of the Common Core and Neo-Kantian approaches, one would also incur the

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<sup>78</sup> Yandell, “How to Sink in Cognitive Quicksand: Nuancing Religious Pluralism,” in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 193. To be precise, Yandell should specify that he is talking only of the *major* religions here.

“tremendous amount of work” necessary for demonstrating that the major religions are “epistemically tied.” Such a demonstration would be necessary since it is not at all obvious that the major religions *are* all “tied.”<sup>79</sup>

Picture, for a moment, the rather odd scenario Egalitarian Pluralism is committed to. According to this view, *some* religions are not true (the non-major religions), or at least not as close to the truth as the *major* religions. While the non-major religions may vary significantly in truthlikeness, only the major religions are “epistemically tied.” This view is depicted in Figure 6.1. Here we can imagine A-E represent the “major religions,” however they are defined, while F-H are the non-major religions. The closer the letter is to the right, the closer that religion approximates the truth.

**Fig. 6.1: Egalitarian Pluralism**



On my view, the distribution of religious truth proposed in Figure 6.1 is rather unlikely for the following two reasons.

First, if all major religions were epistemically tied, it would be a shocking coincidence. Each of the major religions arose in different times, in different parts of the world, in starkly disparate cultures. Given the wide variety of circumstances in which each of these religions arose, it would be quite astonishing if each religion turned out to

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<sup>79</sup> Of course, Egalitarian Pluralism does not claim that all major religions are *exactly* as true as each other. Nonetheless, the claim that they are “roughly as true” as each other would still involve an *epistemic* tie.

approximate the truth to about the same degree as the rest. Moreover, we have no evidence to support such an extraordinary claim. As Yandell notes, no one has attempted the massive undertaking of comparing each religion and demonstrating the epistemic parity each of these religions share.

Secondly, the situation depicted in Figure 6.1 differs a great deal from what we find in other cross-cultural comparisons. Would we not find it odd if, say, five to ten mutually incompatible *astronomical* theories developed in different parts of the world at different periods of time and were all about as true as each other? For one thing, when we find two incompatible theories in the sciences, typically one of these theories is superior. One theory typically improves upon another or explains some fact that the other fails to. Of course there are exceptions to this generality, but to find a wide range of incompatible theories, all about as true as the next, would be quite a fluke. Moreover, we would typically expect some cultures to make more progress than others. Indeed, this is what we typically find with theories developed in different cultures. The ancient Chinese and Greek cultures, for instance, developed quite elaborate astronomical systems much earlier than others. And, when the Copernican system was developed during the Renaissance, it was far superior to any other astronomical systems at that time or previously. Again, it would be rather odd to think that religious theories developed in different cultures all just happened to come out to be about as good as each other. Yet this is what the Egalitarian Pluralist has us believe.

In the previous chapter, we examined the Cultural Superiority thesis (CS). According to this thesis, one culture discovered religious truths that were far more advanced than that of other cultures. I argued there that there is not enough evidence to

think that CS is true. But simply because there is not good reason to think one religion is far more advanced than others does not mean that all religions are just as true as each other. Just as there is not enough evidence to think one religion is superior to every other, there is also not enough evidence to think they are all epistemically tied. What we would expect to find, as we do with other sets of theories developed in different cultures, is that some are better than others.

*Broad Egalitarianism Less Likely than Narrow Egalitarianism*

A further problem for the Egalitarian Pluralist arises when we consider the wide variety of views present even in the “major” religions. For reasons discussed above, we ought to reject Hick’s claim that the divine transcends all substantial categories. Although we may not know if the divine is personal or impersonal, singular or plural, we know that if there is a divine it *must*, on pain of logical necessity, be either personal or *nonpersonal*, singular or *nonsingular*, etc. Thus, the divine has some set of substantial properties. Given this fact, let us consider the difficulty it incurs on egalitarian positions in general.

First, let us suppose that a Christian Egalitarian is one who believes that all *Christian* religions approximate the truth to about the same degree. Such a result is intuitively plausible. Because Christian religions share a great deal of their central beliefs, it would not be surprising if they were all about equally close to truth. Secondly, let us suppose that Semitic Egalitarianism is the view that all faiths growing out of the Semitic tradition (e.g. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) approximate the truth to about the same degree. This view would be a bit harder to accept. While these religions share a number of beliefs such as belief in a single God, certain facts of creation, and the

importance of Abraham, they differ on a number of other central claims. For example, many Christians believe God is triune, although Jews and Muslims do not. Christians also differ in their belief that the person of Jesus Christ is God Incarnate. And this is just a sampling. There are a number of other unique features of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam as well. If, as we assume, the divine has some set of substantial properties, we know that either God is triune or not and that either Jesus Christ is God Incarnate or not. The degree to which Christianity approximates the truth, then, will depend upon what set of properties God has. Perhaps Christianity is closer to the truth than Judaism or Islam or perhaps it is further. One way or the other, it seems unlikely that Christianity is “just about as true” as the other Semitic faiths.

Moreover, if Christian Egalitarianism is somewhat more plausible than Semitic Egalitarianism, the kind of egalitarianism Hick and others propose is even less plausible. Christian Egalitarianism is a rather narrow egalitarian position. It seems that the broader the range of one’s egalitarianism, the more incompatible views it will include. And, the more incompatible views the range includes, the less plausible it becomes to maintain an egalitarian view regarding them. Certainly, the broadest egalitarian view, that of Anarchic Pluralism, is the most implausible. Given the extremely wide range of religions that exist, it would be exceedingly odd if each and every existent religion approximated the truth to about the same degree as every other. Why, then, should we insist that all of the *major* religions are about equally true? The major religions include a very broad range of views, from theistic to atheistic and monotheistic to polytheistic. Because we know that the divine has some set of substantial properties, it is highly likely that some of

these religions are closer to the truth than others.<sup>80</sup> For example, if atheism is true, atheistic religions are closer to the truth than others. If there are many gods, polytheism is closer to the truth than others. Certainly, we may not know which religions are the closest to the truth. At the very least, however, CP4, which claims that *some* major religions are significantly closer to the truth than *some* others, is more likely than Egalitarian Pluralism.

Byrne and Ward appear to acknowledge the difficulties of Egalitarian Pluralism. Ward agrees that we should not believe that the major religions are all equally true.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, he asks, “how could we be sure of that without having some super-view in the light of which we could assess them?”<sup>82</sup> Although Ward rejects egalitarianism, however, he makes the further unfounded speculation that all major religions are somehow “converging” on the truth. Byrne also rejects Egalitarian Pluralism. He struggles to accommodate all religions into his “common reference” version of pluralism. The main difficulty is that Buddhists often lack a divine “referent” altogether. He concludes, however, that Buddhism may still be accommodated by his view:

For our version of pluralism does not need the premise that all religions are equally correct and it allows for reference to succeed despite error in conception.<sup>83</sup>

Because Byrne’s pluralism allows for incompatible descriptions to refer to the same object, he can allow Buddhists to refer to the divine even if they do not believe that there

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<sup>80</sup> Thanks to Justin McBrayer for making this point clear to me.

<sup>81</sup> Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 199.

<sup>82</sup> Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 199.

<sup>83</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 163.

is a divine at all. Although I applaud Byrne's resistance to Egalitarian Pluralism, he also makes an unfounded speculation – that all major religions *refer to the same object*.

Critical Pluralism is a much more modest view. It makes only four assertions, CP1-CP4. Because the likelihood of an “epistemic tie” among the major religions is so unlikely, the Critical Pluralist claims that some major religions are significantly closer to the truth than some other major religions. The position, however, may best be characterized by what it does *not* claim. It does not make any assertion regarding (1) exactly how many religions are approximately true, (2) which major religions are closer to the truth than others, (3) precisely how staggered the major religions are from each other in approximating of the truth. Moreover, the Critical Pluralist does not, like Byrne, assert that all major religions refer to the same object. Nor does the Critical Pluralist claim that all major religions are converging on the truth, as Ward speculates. Thus, because the Critical Pluralist is noncommittal on a number of issues, the position is compatible with a wider range of possibilities.

### *The Benefits of Critical Pluralism*

Although Critical Pluralism is a fairly modest view, it loses hardly any of the benefits that the bolder pluralist alternatives possess. To be more precise, Critical Pluralism is compatible with the widespread availability of salvation, saintliness, and veridical religious experience. If my pluralist view can accommodate these three benefits without any of the troubling metaphysical trappings of Hick's Neo-Kantian scheme or Byrne's common reference thesis, it appears to be a significant improvement on these views.

The first of these benefits is one that is common to all of the views of religious diversity that I have seriously considered. One of the original assumptions I have made in this work is that salvation is available to those from more than one religion. As I argue in Chapter 2, if we think of the divine as ultimately good, we can imagine that no one would be excluded from salvation for reasons that are not one's fault. Moreover, because what religion people are born into is often the result of certain social and cultural factors that one has no control of, it is hard to imagine that salvation depends on such facts. Thus, my view is no different than the others considered here. Although some major religions are closer to the truth than some other major religions, salvation can still be available to those whose beliefs are not as close to the truth.

The second benefit of my view, that saintliness is also available to those from multiple traditions, should be evident from my discussion of saintliness in the previous chapter. There, I examined the evidence of saints in various religious traditions and argued that there is not a single religion that appears to have a monopoly on "saint production." Even if we understand saintliness as the "spiritual liberation" that is achieved by meditation or prayer, we do not find one religion to have a great deal more saints. While I argued that this provides good reason to doubt that a single religion is significantly closer to the truth than all others, the evidence of saints in multiple traditions does not indicate that all religions are "epistemically tied" either. There is evidence for neither position.<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, the evidence of saints in multiple religious traditions shows that saintliness, like salvation, can be available to those whose beliefs are not as close to the truth as others. Byrne seems to be correct that reference to or contact with

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<sup>84</sup> See also Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, 178.

the divine is possible even if one's descriptions about the divine are false. And, if this is possible, it seems that saintliness is also possible despite false beliefs. Given that saints seem to be present in religions with mutually incompatible beliefs, it seems that saintliness cannot be overly dependent on correct beliefs.

Finally, Critical Pluralism is consistent with the claim that veridical religious experience is available to those from multiple traditions. Just as one can have contact with the divine despite one's beliefs being false, one can have at least partially veridical religious experiences despite having false beliefs. In order to defend this claim, it may be helpful again to examine the Witness Case. Suppose once more that a variety of witnesses give incompatible accounts of a single incident. Of course, given the contradictions among these accounts, not every experience can be fully veridical.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, following Byrne, we can allow that many experiences may be "of the same thing" despite the fact that some of the descriptions attributed to these experiences may be incorrect. Suppose, for example, that the witnesses each give a different description of a criminal. Let us imagine that the criminal is a middle-aged man. Although some of the witnesses reported seeing a young boy or an elderly lady instead of a middle-aged man, we can still admit that they did see "something" although perhaps they are somewhat mistaken about what they saw.<sup>86</sup> Thus, although incompatible religious experiences cannot all be fully veridical, they can be *partially* veridical. Moreover, although Critical Pluralism does assert that some major religions are substantially closer to the truth than

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<sup>85</sup> Hick, on the other hand, wants to allow even contradictory accounts to be veridical. His *phenomena/noumena* distinction allows incompatible religious experiences to be veridical of the *phenomenal* realm, although strictly speaking no experience is, or even could be, veridical of the *noumenal* realm. Given the insurmountable difficulties with the Neo-Kantian account, however, I do not consider it a flaw of Critical Pluralism that it cannot allow *contradictory* experiences to be veridical.

<sup>86</sup> Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 127-8.

other major religions, there is nothing to prevent those whose religions are further from the truth than others to have *fully* veridical religious experiences as well. As is the case with salvation and saintliness, the availability of veridical religious experience is not dependent on having correct religious beliefs.

## **Conclusion**

Given my arguments above, it should be clear that the current Egalitarian Pluralist positions are severely flawed. Moreover, the Egalitarian Pluralist thesis appears unlikely and is thus not worth preserving. Critical Pluralism offers a more modest pluralist position that avoids the difficulties of Egalitarian Pluralism and the unnecessary speculations of the Aspectival Approach. Ultimately, admitting that some major religions are substantially closer to the truth than other major religions alleviates the pluralist's need to develop intricate metaphysical systems such as Hick's Neo-Kantianism. At the same time, the Critical Pluralist does not need to sacrifice the benefits of a pluralist view. Although all major religious traditions are not equally true, salvation, saintliness, and veridical religious experience can be available to those from multiple religious traditions.

In conclusion, I would like to address the practical import of Critical Pluralism. As religions are merely approximations of the truth, some better some worse, should everyone renounce their religion? Should we attempt to create a new and better religion? What ought we to think about the religious beliefs of others?

First, it is important to note that Critical Pluralism is not itself a religion but a second-order *philosophical* position regarding religion.<sup>87</sup> Secondly, although one of Critical Pluralism's theses is that "no one religion *very closely* approximates the truth," it still may be better simply for practical purposes that one participates in some religious practice. Suppose for example, that the benefits of achieving salvation or saintliness are increased by taking part in some religious tradition or other rather than none at all. Third, in addition to the practical benefits of religion, there may not be anything irrational about believing in a theory that is not a complete description of the truth or even a very close approximation. If *all* religions are merely approximate attempts to describe a transcendent reality, perhaps placing one's belief in one such attempt is the best one can do as a finite human being.

Acknowledging that religions *are* imperfect but the best that we can do is perhaps the greatest practical lesson one can take from the Critical Pluralist view. Janet Soskice puts this well herself:

This is the fine edge at which negative theology and positive theology meet, for the apophatic insight that we say nothing of God, but only point towards Him, is the basis for the tentative and avowedly inadequate stammerings by which we attempt to speak of God and His acts. And, as we have argued, this separation of referring and defining is at the very heart of metaphorical speaking and is what makes it not only possible but necessary that in our stammering after a transcendent God we must speak, for the most part, metaphorically or not at all.<sup>88</sup>

If religious believers begin to see their own faiths as, "tentative and avowedly inadequate stammerings," perhaps one can begin to see religious diversity as merely a variety of inadequate ways of "pointing toward" the transcendent. Perhaps understanding religious

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<sup>87</sup> Byrne points this out about pluralism in general in his *Prolegomena*, 199.

<sup>88</sup> Soskice, 140.

diversity in this way may allow religious believers of all faiths to recognize the spiritual insights of other traditions.

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