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## A CONCLUDING COMMENT

John Hick

I am grateful to the Editor for his invitation to write a comment on the papers in this issue. I only have the space, and the time, to do so in a highly selective and discriminatory way, taking up some of the points made about the pluralistic hypothesis, which seems to me to constitute the most hopeful approach to an interpretation of the facts of religious diversity.

Robert McKim distinguishes usefully between what he calls moderate and radical pluralism, and rightly identifies my own position as a form of moderate pluralism. That is to say, the hypothesis that seems to me to account best, from a religious point of view, for the history of religions holds that what McKim calls the Religious Reality is known to human beings through their religious experience, and that this is formed jointly by the universal presence to us of that Reality and the different sets of concepts and spiritual practices developed by the world's religious traditions. In the case of those exceptionally vivid moments of religious experience that are called mystical, this analysis is easy to accept. The content of such experiences is manifestly tradition-specific. A Roman Catholic may see a vision of the Virgin Mary but will not see one of Krishna; a Protestant Christian may hear the voice of Jesus but will not hear the voice of Kali; and so on. One can of course take the naive realist view that Mary was (or was not) personally present to this person at this time and place, and Krishna to that person, and that Jesus was personally uttering to another person some particular words in, say, German. All this is possible. One could also, from a naturalistic point of view, regard all such experiences as purely hallucinatory. But the interpretation that seems to me most plausible and rationally acceptable from a religious point of view is that in such cases there is a heightened human openness to the Religious Reality, giving rise to a conscious experience whose concrete form is determined by the individual's training and expectations. And I suggest that the same general interpretation applies to the less vivid and the more gently pervasive forms of religious experience that occur in prayer or meditation, sacrament or scripture reading, or as a sense of the divine presence amid the beauties of nature or the immensities of space, or in moments of special exaltation or illumination, or at the times of birth and death . . . . These experiences receive their character or meaning from religious concepts imbibed from our social milieu and linguistic community.



And so if we seek a religious, as distinguished from a naturalistic, interpretation of religion in its plurality of forms, it seems to me that we find it in the hypothesis of a transcendent Religious Reality which is variously conceived, and hence variously experienced, and hence variously responded to within the different religious cultures of the earth.

From this point of view it is true to say that we do experience the Real. However, as with all other perceptions, we perceive it, not as it is in itself, unobserved, but as it is in its relation to the perceiver, with her or his particular conceptual equipment. This conceptual equipment includes both universal human elements and also an individual version of the distinctive conceptual system taught by one's religious tradition. We thus perceive the Real through the mental 'lense' of one of the great traditions, with their distinctive forms of spiritual practice, sets of ideas, formative stories and myths, and treasuries of inspirational literature. All that we can properly say about the Real *an sich*, according to this hypothesis, is that it is the ultimate ground of its varying manifestations to human consciousness. These consciousnesses, and the linguistic worlds which have formed them, supply the concepts that give structure and form to awareness of the Real. But the variety of these concepts is such that they cannot all characterize the Real in itself. It is of course possible that the ideas of some one particular tradition, say Christianity, accurately characterize the Real, which is accordingly a trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It will follow that the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other conceptions of the Religious Reality are false. But suppose we accept that (as I have argued in my paper in this issue) so far as we can tell the great world traditions are more or less equally effective contexts of salvific transformation. It will then follow that a tradition's conception of the Religious Reality makes no difference to its salvific effectiveness. But this would remove the religious point of a claim to a valid characterization of the Religious Reality. Would it not be more acceptable to suppose that these characterizations *are* salvifically important, but that what they characterize is not the Real in itself but different authentic manifestations of it to human life?

It follows of course from this two-level hypothesis of a noumenal Real and its phenomenal manifestations that there can be no cult of the Real in itself. We do not worship the Real *an sich* but the Real as known to us as the Heavenly Father, or Allah, or Adonai, or Vishnu, or Shiva . . . or in a self-transcending openness to Brahman or Nirvana, or Sunyata or the Dharmakaya . . . . But how then, McKim asks, can we understand the idea of divine activity in history, in providence, miracle, revelation, and answer to prayer? In the kind of way that many Christian theologians have come to understand them. A putative divine act is an earthly event experienced as mediating God's presence and purpose; a putative miracle is a remarkable happening experienced as a miracle; and a putative divine verbal revelation is an item of human language experienced as

divine revelation. Such modes of experiencing-as are integral to the Christian tradition (as well as to other traditions) and the tradition as a whole is, on the pluralistic hypothesis, an authentic human response to the Real.

McKim asks how we can know that Christianity (or any other tradition) *is* an authentic response to the Real. The answer is circular, but is an instance of the kind of benign circle that all fundamental faith positions involve. We believe by faith that there is a transcendent divine Reality to which our religious tradition is a response. We believe this partly because we observe within it some degree of a transformation of human beings which we cannot help regarding as wholly good and profoundly desirable; and we affirm the Real as the ultimate source of this transforming power. But all this constitutes a circle of faith—a circle that we are, I believe, rationally entitled to stand in even though we cannot establish it by external evidences or proofs.

David Basinger's article is, in my view, a very helpful constructive contribution. There is only one sentence, in which he characterizes the pluralistic suggestion as being 'that the basic claims of at least all the major world religions are more or less accurate descriptions of the same reality,' that I would wish to amend to avoid misunderstanding: not 'descriptions of the same reality' but 'descriptions of different manifestations of the same reality.' But Basinger's fuller account of the pluralist hypothesis later in his paper is accurate and balanced.

Basinger's argument seems to me to be correct. It is evident that the contemporary Reformed epistemologists, headed by Alvin Plantinga, tend to be theologically extremely conservative and probably strongly inclined towards an exclusivist theology of religions. But nevertheless this type of epistemology does not logically require a conservative or exclusivist theology. The idea that we are rationally entitled to believe what our experience—including our religious experience—induces us to believe, seems to me to be correct. (It is a position that I have advocated from *Faith and Knowledge*, 1957, onwards). But—and this is an additional consideration to Basinger's—we have to distinguish between, on the one hand, basic beliefs such as the belief that I see a tree, or that I remember having had breakfast, or that I am in the presence of God, and on the other hand secondary interpretive theories such as that Jesus had two distinct natures, or that the Christian awareness of God is the only authentic awareness of God. These latter are theological theories which exceed the range of properly basic beliefs directly grounded in our experience. They are optional theories about those properly basic beliefs; and different optional theories are always available. Thus whilst the epistemologist of religion *can* adopt conservative and exclusivist theological theories, she is not obliged to do so. She may prefer a different theology, taking fuller account of the scientific study of the scriptures, modern knowledge of Christian origins, and the wealth of information that is available today concerning the history of religions. It would indeed be a great pity if what

is today called the Reformed epistemology were thought to be exclusively Calvinist and to require a sixteenth century set of theological ideas to go with it. I hope that Basinger's argument may lessen the hold of Calvinist influence upon the theologically neutral topics of epistemology.

There is much of interest and value in Paul Griffiths' article. But when he comes to discuss my writings he seems to be gripped by a polemical spirit which leads to misrepresentation. I can readily believe that this is due to a noble enthusiasm for the truth as he sees it; but unfortunately I now have to use valuable space in pointing out these misrepresentations.

Griffiths thinks that I hold that the ultimate reality can be correctly characterized in mutually incompatible ways. Thus, he says, 'to take an example from Buddhism and Christianity, that ultimate reality must be such that it can be characterized both as a set of evanescent instantaneous events connected to one another by specifiable causes but without any substantial independent existence, and as an eternal changeless divine personal substance' (p. 413). On the view that Griffiths is (surely rightly) here rejecting, the ultimate reality has all the characteristics which the different religions ascribe to the objects of their worship or meditation. It is accordingly personal and non-personal, triune and unitary, active and not active, changing and unchanging, and so on. As Griffiths says, 'While it may not be impossible to construct some picture of ultimate reality which meets these demands, it is far from easy to see how it might be done' (p. 413). However I have not attempted any such feat, and I am indeed even less sanguine than Griffiths that it could be done. He shows a half awareness of this when in the next paragraph he speaks of 'a bow in the direction of ineffability' and then of 'a fundamental distinction between [the Real] as it is *an sich* and as it is apprehended by us' (p. 413). But he has not seen the relevance of this distinction—which is fundamental to the pluralist hypothesis—to the question of incompatible attributes. The Real *an sich* does not have incompatible properties. On the contrary, it lies beyond the scope of our (other than purely formal) human concepts. But it is humanly thought, experienced and responded to in terms of a wide variety of religious concepts. Thus it is conceived and experienced from within the Christian tradition as a triune deity; from within the Islamic tradition as a unitary deity; from within Mahayana Buddhism as the non-personal Dharmakaya, and so on. The incompatible characteristics are not attributed to the same object, the Real *an sich*, but are distributed among its different manifestations within the different streams of religious experience and thought, constituting the great world faiths.

Again, it is incorrect to suggest that the pluralistic hypothesis, holding that salvation takes place within all the world religions, entails 'that there be no substantive conflicts among the truth claims of those traditions' (p. 414). I have discussed many such conflicts. But they cease to be a matter of religious life

and death when we accept that one who knows God as the Holy Trinity need not deny that a Muslim knows God equally authentically and salvifically as Allah, or a Jew as Adonai; and that a theist, who experiences the Real in personalistic terms, need not deny that an advaitic Hindu experiences the Real equally authentically and salvifically in non-personalistic terms. The different and incompatible beliefs remain, but they are beliefs about different and perhaps equally salvific manifestations of the Real.

Griffiths says that 'The thrust of the position is to remove the need for excluding as false or inadequate any doctrine-expressing sentence of significance to any community' (p. 414). However the basic criterion that I have advocated in a number of places is soteriological. A religious tradition has value to the extent that it constitutes an effective context for the salvific transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. This transformation is recognized by its visible fruits in individuals and societies. I have argued that the great world religions recognize these fruits with a basically common criterion of love/compassion/unselfish good will—a criterion which readily excludes such movements as the Jim Jones cult or, as a larger and more terrible phenomenon, Nazism.

Whether 'all the major world religions . . . are equally effective in mediating religious reality and in transforming for the better the lives of those who adhere to them' (p. 413) is not a matter to be settled *a priori* but on the basis of historical investigation. I have suggested that we do not in fact have sufficient information for more than the tentative negative conclusion that we lack any good ground to claim that one of the great world traditions has been more soteriologically effective than another.

Finally, it seems to me highly inappropriate to describe my own position as '*a priori* pluralism.' It is an hypothesis arrived at inductively to explain the phenomena of the varied religious life of humanity. Starting with the stream of religious experience and thought in which one participates, and making the basic judgment of faith that this constitutes a response (obviously a culturally conditioned response) to a transcendent divine reality, one then extends that judgment to the other major world religions, reasoning that because they show comparable spiritual fruits they too must be presumed to be (differently culturally conditioned) responses to the ultimate divine reality. One then looks for a hypothesis to make sense of these data; and the result, in my own mind, is a pluralistic theory hinging upon the distinction between the Real in itself and the Real as variously humanly conceived and experienced.

Joseph Runzo, in his valuable article, offers three criticisms of the pluralistic hypothesis. He suggests, first, that it 'fails to adequately account for the necessary, central role of cognition in religious faith' (p. 353), because it is religious beliefs that in each case define a specific path of salvation. I can see no reason, however,

why a pluralist should want to deny that the different ways of salvation are defined by their respective associated belief-systems. What the pluralist wishes to add is that there is a plurality of such ways of salvation, each defined by its own set of doctrines. Thus beliefs do play an important part in the religious life—there could be no religious life without at least a certain minimal body of beliefs. But nevertheless a pluralist will want to insist that no one of the doctrinal systems taught by the great traditions is such that it is essential for salvation that one believe that system.

Second, he sees it as a defect of the pluralistic theory that it does not regard the Real in itself as a personal deity, as Christianity teaches. It suggests rather that the Real *an sich* lies beyond the scope of our (other than purely formal) concepts, including the concepts of personality and impersonality; although it is authentically (i.e., salvifically) experienced by many human persons as a cosmic super-person. Thus pluralism does not deny the authenticity of the Christian experience of a personal God; but it adds that the Ultimate Reality which we experience in personal terms is also authentically experienced from within some other religious traditions in non-personal terms. But Runzo is right in pointing to this as a departure from traditional Christian teaching, and as constituting a real stumbling block for traditionally-minded Christians. Our tradition has however developed to an extraordinary extent over the centuries and perhaps it may come to accommodate the thought that Buddhists, for example, are also responding, through their own non-personal conceptuality, to the one ultimate Reality.

Third, Runzo holds that for pluralism God is unreal, a mere phenomenal appearance of the Real rather than being the Real *an sich*. But, as he is aware, according to the pluralistic hypothesis the phenomenal manifestations of the Real, the divine *personae* and *impersonae*, are the noumenal Real as humanly experienced in terms of the various conceptual schemas. This seems very similar to Runzo's own position.

Indeed I find it difficult to distinguish Runzo's Relativism from the Pluralism from which he wants to separate it. For when he speaks of many divine realities, each known through the conceptual schema of a particular tradition, he means many *phenomenal* divine realities. He adds that 'God *qua* noumenal lies "behind," so to speak, the possible plurality of real phenomenal divine realities, delimited by different monotheistic world-views' (p. 356). Again, he says that 'what is putatively experienced is not the noumenal Ultimate Reality, but e.g., the *real* [by which he means the phenomenal or experienced] God of history' (p. 358). But is not this precisely the pluralistic hypothesis that he was criticizing? Perhaps, however, the difference is that the full pluralistic hypothesis extends to the non-theistic forms of religious experience whilst Runzo's relativism only covers the monotheisms? It would be helpful if Runzo would clarify the difference between pluralism and his own form of relativism.

William Alston's qualified defence, in his usual careful manner, of continued reliance on the distinctively Christian doxastic practice, despite the impossibility of establishing objectively that it is superior to its Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim etc. equivalents, seems to me to succeed, given his presuppositions. He assumes that there is one and only one true religion, or true set of religious beliefs; and since the religion in which we find ourselves (usually by the accident of birth) 'works' satisfactorily, meeting our spiritual needs and leading us in what we take to be the right direction, we should stay with it, adhering to its distinctive practices and system of ideas. We can do this even whilst being aware that there are people living within each of the other great world faiths who find themselves in precisely analogous positions.

Alston candidly acknowledges that the awareness of religious plurality should properly diminish our confidence that our own is the (one and only) true religion. I take it that, on the basis of his argument, whilst it is entirely reasonable to hold to our own faith, it would not be reasonable to go out and seek to convert the rest of the world to it. Thus the practical outcomes of Alston's and the pluralist's positions are the same: each believer should, generally speaking, live within her or his inherited faith, participating as deeply as possible in its salvific path, but at the same time respecting the right of people within other traditions to do likewise.

I would suggest however that the real challenge of religious pluralism for Alston is not to his epistemology—which seems, to me at least, to represent the right approach to the epistemology of religion,—but to what one might call the doxastic exclusivism prompted by his theology. If, as I have argued in my own paper, the great world faiths seem to be more or less equally salvifically effective, is it satisfactory to hold that one of them thinks truly and the rest falsely about the divine reality to which they are all responding with apparently equal success? Would it not be more in accordance with what seem to be the facts of the religious life of humanity around the globe and across the centuries to suppose that the different sets of religious ideas and practices taught by the great world traditions, including our own, constitute different but in each case valid ways of conceiving, experiencing and responding to the ultimately Real?

Such a line of thought would perhaps most naturally lead towards a two-level epistemology of religion in which we affirm a noumenal divine Reality which is humanly understood and experienced as a plurality of divine phenomena. But if there are other ways of thinking through the implications of an acceptance of the equal salvific effectiveness of Christianity and of the other great world faiths, these ought to be produced.