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PERILS OF PLURALISM

Kelly James Clark

Two pressures toward religious pluralism are the variety of religious tradi-
tions which seem equally successful in the transformation of human lives
and that apparently sincere and equally capable truth-seekers reach diver-
gent conclusions about the nature of ultimate reality. I discuss Hick's
Kantian explanation of these phenomena. I argue that his account is: nei-
ther the only nor the best account; furthermore that more reasonable
accounts allow for the members of competing traditions to affirm the truth
of their religious beliefs; and if Hick's explanation were accepted it would
undermine the salvific power of the respective religious traditions.

I

John Hick claims that there is a variety of religious traditions each of
which, so far as we can tell, is equally successful in the transformation of
human lives. Although they differ in their characterizations both of the
goal of human life and of the processes necessary for the attainment of
such goals, each of the disparate processes seems nonetheless well-suited
for the goal of the transformation of human lives from self-centeredness
to what he terms Reality-centeredness. Salvation/liberation/fulfill-
ment/enlightenment are among the many and most prominent names of
this goal; for shorthand, I shall use the term "transformation" for salva-
tion/liberation/fulfillment/enlightenment throughout the paper. Each
religion offers its own, unique path to transformation. Pragmatically
speaking, according to Hick, claims to exclusive access to religious truth
for the various religions seem unfounded or even irrelevant.
   Religious diversity recognizes that apparently sincere and equally
cognitively capable truth-seekers reach widely divergent conclusions
about the nature of ultimate reality. The pressures of diversity are clear:
to maintain that's one's own religious beliefs are true and, therefore, that
all religious competitors are false smacks of arrogance and intolerance.
Religious exclusivism also seems to make transformation a matter of
luck — that is, if traditional Christianity, for example, is true then it is
just a matter of luck that you happen to have been born to a conserva-
tive, Christian family in the heart of America; if you had been born in
India, say, you more than likely would have been a Hindu. Momentous

options, such as one's eternal destiny, ought not hang on the thin thread
of chance.

If only one transformational system is true and outside of that trans-
formational system none is saved, more people will be spiritually lost
than not (assuming, as many religions claim, that most people have not
availed themselves of the appropriate transformational system); this is a
clearly undesirable state of affairs; the damnation of the vast majority of
the peoples of the world and throughout history is indeed lamentable. If
an explanation of religious diversity is forthcoming which is both likely
to be true and is transformationally generous and inclusive, then it
ought to be wholeheartedly embraced.

In this essay I shall discuss Hick's rather Kantian explanation of these
phenomena. I shall argue that such an account of religious diversity is:
(a) neither the only nor the best account. In addition I will argue that (b)
a better account allows for the members of competing traditions to
affirm the exclusive truth of their religious beliefs, and (c) if Hick's
Kantian explanation were accepted it would undermine the transforma-
tional power of the respective religious traditions.

Before turning to criticisms of Hick's position, let us outline his
Kantian explanation of religious diversity. Hick's understanding of reli-
gious diversity is called religious pluralism which he contrasts with
exclusivism and inclusivism. Exclusivism is that view that transforma-
tion is restricted to a single group and that everyone outside of that
group is excluded from transformation. Inclusivism is the view that
while a single group may hold the correct view concerning the means of
transformation (say that it is through the death of Jesus on the cross), the
benefits of transformation are nonetheless available to those outside of
that group (people can be washed in the blood of Jesus, even if they
aren't aware of it); universalism is consistent with inclusivism.
Religious pluralism is thoroughly universalistic and affirms a plurality
of transformational responses to the ultimate divine reality; each of the
religious traditions is transformationally efficacious; none of the reli-
gious traditions is in a transformationally privileged position.

A universal affirmation of the various major religious traditions is the
transcendence of divine Reality.[1] Transcendence, according to Hick, is
the view that the divine Reality "cannot be encompassed in human
terms."[2] He distinguishes "the Real *an sich* (in him/her/itself) and the
Real as humanly experienced and thought."[3] This divine Reality is one
yet capable of being experienced in a multitude of ways.[4] The variety of
religious traditions is formed out of this awareness of the divine: "Our
hypothesis is that they are formed by the presence of the divine Reality,
this presence coming to consciousness in terms of the different sets of
religious concepts and structures of religious meaning that operate with-
in the different religious traditions of the world."[5] Hick endorses an
explicitly Kantian understanding of the distinction between the Real *an
sich* and the real as humanly experienced.[6] The Kantian distinction
between phenomena and noumena is apparent. We can have access to
the phenomenal world of religious experience, of appearances as catego-
rized by human cognitive powers, but not to the divine noumenal

world. What we do not, indeed cannot, encounter in these experiences is Reality in itself.

The great virtue of Hick's metaphysics is that it makes most every religious tradition, in a sense, true. We can be wrong about reality claims, but how could we be wrong about how things appear to us? So God or the Absolute or the Whatever appears to some as personal, to others as impersonal and to others as non-existent. And each is right, insofar as their understanding of their beliefs does not extend beyond the terms of appearances. God appears to me, for example, to be personal (given my contingent location within a particular historico-cultural tradition). Religious assertions, properly translated into appearance language, are all true.

But this conceptual gain is bought with a price—no religious assertions, as claims about reality, are true. Indeed, they are either unjustified, false or meaningless insofar as they ascribe properties to God *an sich*. God may appear to us as loving, kind, patient, just, jealous, rock, snake or non-existent. But what God is *an sich* is utter mystery. We cannot, due to our cognitive limitations, peer behind the veil of appearances to Reality. What God is really like is something we know not what. As Hick writes:

> ...we cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its *personae* and *impersonae*. Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive. None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable ground of that realm. For whereas the phenomenal world is structured by our own conceptual frameworks, its noumenal ground is not. We cannot even speak of this as a thing or an entity...the noumenal Real is such as to be authentically experienced as a range of both theistic and nontheistic phenomena. On this basis we cannot, as we have seen, say that the Real *an sich* has the characteristics displayed by its manifestations, such as (in the case of the heavenly Father) love and justice or (in the case of Brahman) consciousness and bliss. But it is nevertheless the noumenal ground of these characteristics.[7]

Although none of our beliefs about God *an sich* is or can be known to be true, Hick nonetheless affirms such beliefs as genuine manifestations of the divine and as reliable guides for transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.

II

There are at least four possible explanations of the widespread religious disagreement of apparently sincere truth-seekers. Let me list them with a brief description of each:

H₁. **The Kantian Explanation.** God as he is in himself cannot be known. We can only know God as he appears to us. No humanly avail-

able concepts apply to God.[8]

H₂. **The Cultural Filter Explanation.** God presents himself to people as he is in himself but the effects of one's socio-cultural background cause him to be understood in radically different ways. Although all beliefs are "laden" with one's cultural categories or gestalt[9], some are closer to the truth than others. That is, some cultural filters enable rather than distort perception of the truth.

H₃. **The Perversity Explanation.** There is a determinate way that God is experienced but human wickedness perverts beliefs about God. According to this view, God as experienced is both terrifying and inviting. Rather than give up belief in God, he is tamed by our wills to make him more manageable.[10] The defect, according to this view, is not noetic or metaphysical, because everyone has roughly the same cognitive equipment and the same informational input; it is, rather, volitional. The Perversity Explanation affirms that religious competitors are only apparently sincere truth-seekers; they are not so in reality—those who hold incorrect views are involved in willful or self-deceptive insincerity.

H₄. **The Epistemically Privileged Explanation.** There is a determinate way that God reveals himself to all people, say through experience, nature or morality, but some people have been graciously given more information about God than others. According to this view everyone has some access to significant knowledge of God. Nonetheless, either through revelation or more frequent and detailed experiences, some people simply have access to more of the divine truth. The remainder are not epistemologically destitute but they have been left more to their own devices in the development of their religious traditions; they have needed to fill in the theological gaps, so to speak, but in an informational void. The additional theological commitments are mere human accretions that are, therefore, more liable to misunderstanding and error.

Which of these is the best explanation of religious diversity? We may prefer the Kantian Explanation because it makes all religious beliefs, at least as appearance beliefs, true; but we have noted the costs of such a belief: all religious beliefs as reality claims are either unjustified, false or meaningless.[11] There is the further possibility that behind the veil of appearance lies nothing or no one interested in transformation. According to this view everyone can be transformed; or can they? Skepticism about God *an sich* makes optimism about the generous opportunities for transformation equally dubious. This view is long on promise but its fulfillment is uncertain. Religious belief maintains an interest in one's ultimate destiny but also that reality undergirds the possible attainment of a favorable outcome. So, to take Christianity as an example, salvation is the goal (peace with God, self, other humans and the world) and the means of attainment are the atonement of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit. If ultimate Reality is indifferent both to these ends and to these means, then what remains of one's Christian beliefs? Hick's Kantian view offers no assurance that divine reality is at all concerned about either means or ends.

The Cultural Filter Explanation holds out the possibility of attaining objective truth about God. Yet we are all trapped within the filters of

our socio-historical tradition. There is no filter-independent means, so to speak, for determining if our cognitive lens is filtering out distortions and focusing on the truth. We cannot get what Nagel calls "the view from nowhere" to observe both our beliefs and the reality they attempt to grasp. One might argue that we can check our beliefs to determine if they are tracking reality in ways analogous to science which is itself a human project likewise situated within the flow of human history. Science appeals to factors like predictive success, fertility, explanatory power, simplicity and the like which are intended to reduce the distorting effects of our socio-historical filters and provide some assurance that we are progressing towards the truth. Some are dubious that such pragmatic criteria do the work that scientific realists contend and argue that in the end pronouncements of progressive verisimilitude are no more than professions of faith.[12] Nonetheless, pragmatic criteria simply won't do as a means for separating the religious chaff from the wheat. For presumably such criteria will be moral or spiritual and most major religions claim success at transformation. From within one's own culture, one's own tradition will appear superior. We may be able to rule out the odd cult or the occasional demonic religion, but we won't have progressed much towards eliminating any of the various major world religions as contenders for the truth. The Cultural Filters Explanation holds out the possibility of attaining truth about God, but makes it difficult to determine if anyone has actually grasped it. In order to distinguish the Cultural Filters Explanation from the Epistemically Privileged Explanation, I will stipulate that one's cultural filters are not divinely implanted or epistemically justified.[13]

Although the Perversity Explanation has a rich history, it has been afforded little credence of late. The Apostle Paul in the first book of Romans, for example, argues that everyone has been granted knowledge of God but, through human wickedness, has exchanged that truth for a lie; we have suppressed the truth, he says, in unrighteousness. The Augustinian tradition has followed St. Paul on these matters and attributes unbelief to concupiscence. According to this view, false belief about God is willful (although not necessarily conscious) and is thereby morally culpable ignorance.   I don't think Christianity alone is liable to this view; I have little doubt that were I a student of world religions I would discover, amongst the Holy writ of the various religions, perversity explanations of their religious competitors. The Perversity Explanation has fallen on hard times because of the pressures of tolerance and abhorrence of arrogance — many people eschew impugning the motives of one who from all appearances is an equally sincere truthseeker. Even more so, such persons do not wish to impugn an entire tradition of apparently sincere and evidently pious religious believers.

The Epistemically Privileged Explanation allows both for some, albeit limited, access to the truth on the part of everyone and some, more privileged and extensive, access to the truth on the part of others (typically a minority); some people are simply in a better epistemic situation with respect to the divine Reality. But which are in this better cognitive position? Each of the major religions, of course, will claim that it is. If epis-

temic privilege has been granted to a single tradition, however, all of the other traditions will be wrong, at least on areas of disagreement to which the privileged few alone have been granted epistemic access. Again, which of those is in a better epistemic position with respect to God? From all appearances it is hard to tell. One might expect that the people within the tradition which has privileged access would be more transformationally successful. They, after all, have more truth and should have more means at their disposal of availing themselves of the truth in a transformationally advantageous manner. But, again, given the apparent success of the major religions in effecting at least significant moral improvement, it is difficult to appeal to transformational superiority in determining epistemic privilege.

One might contend that granting special access to the truth to some and not to others is gratuitous on the part of God and one would be right. This seems to make transformation more a matter of luck (aka providence) than seems appropriate for a loving God (which assumption cannot be affirmed on the Kantian view). It is probably no accident that certain forms of Christianity, say, have endorsed both the privileged epistemic access explanation and a strong view of predestination. These two views are not necessarily concomitant however. God may have granted special epistemic access to a certain group of people not simply to save them and to damn the remainder (who have, according to some views, insufficient knowledge for transformation but sufficient knowledge to be damned) but to make them responsible for the dissemination of such truths to the remainder. The privilege of extra divine information carries with it more peril—of failing in the corresponding obligation to share that knowledge. Or perhaps, given human weakness of will, any additional information about God simply increases one's opportunity for damnation. The increased knowledge of God may carry with it a burden which few can bear. Perhaps, therefore, it is more transformationally beneficial to have been granted only a bit of the divine by which to be judged than the whole lot given to the privileged who are doomed to failure. At any rate the Epistemically Privileged Explanation of the plurality of religions smacks of arbitrariness on the part of God and, given that transformational systems of competing religions are roughly equal in moral transformation, does not assist in determining which religion is true.

The moral of this section is clear: the diversity of religious beliefs, taken alone, underdetermines which of the above explanations is true. Each of these explanations adequately explains some forms of religious diversity and each has significant religious costs and benefits. Hick's Kantian explanation is successful in explaining the data but no more successful than any of the competing explanations. Unless one is committed *a priori* to a Kantian metaphysics/epistemology, and Hick has not argued on *a priori* grounds, the Kantian view has no explanatory advantage over its competitors. It is not arguably the best explanation and as I shall show in the next section it is arguably not the best explanation.

III

In the previous section I outlined four possible explanations of religious diversity. I can see no reason for not supposing that they are all roughly equally successful in explaining religious diversity and that none is any more successful at explaining the data than any other. Furthermore I can see no *a priori* reason for accepting one of the hypotheses over the others; that is, on logical or metaphysical grounds none of the explanations is to be preferred. Which explanation ought one accept? For reflective religious believers this is a matter of some urgency. At least one of the explanations, Hick's, contends that no religious beliefs are indicative of the divine reality; others, as exemplified in many of the world's great religions, exclude the vast majority from transformation. In this section I shall argue that it is reasonable for a religious believer to affirm one of the more realist explanations of religious diversity and that it is unreasonable for them to accept Hick's Kantian Explanation.

Hick's Kantian account of the varieties of equally transformational religious traditions is motivated in large part by his commitment to religious pluralism and not vice versa. Pressures of religious diversity drive the Kantian explanation; the Kantian explanation does not drive his views of religious diversity. He writes: "The hypothesis of an ultimate divine noumenon is arrived at inductively. We start from the phenomenological data of the forms of religious experience and thought presented by the history of religion. We then seek to interpret these data from the standpoint of the basic conviction that religious experience is not, as such and *in toto*, a realm of illusory projection but is also, at least in part, an effect within human consciousness of the presence and pressure of a transcendent divine Reality."[14] Hick's metaphysical underpinning of religious pluralism has the alleged advantages of preserving the integrity of the great religious traditions and of allowing for the transformation of everyone regardless of their religious allegiances. I shall demonstrate, however, that Hick's claim to have arrived at his conclusion inductively is simply unsupported by argument.

How might such an inductive argument proceed? A well known theorem of the probability calculus is Bayes' theorem. Bayes' theorem is commonly used in confirmation theory and has been applied recently to the rational justification of beliefs. Bayes' theorem is stated as follows (where $\underline{h}$ is the hypothesis in question, $\underline{e}$ is the relevant evidence, and $\underline{k}$ is general background knowledge):

$$P(h/e\&k) = \frac{P(e/h\&k)}{P(e/k)} \times P(h/k)$$

For the purposes of this discussion let us take $\underline{h}$ to stand for one of the competing explanations of religious diversity, H_1-H_4. I will discuss shortly how we should understand $\underline{k}$.

How should we understand the evidence of religious diversity, $\underline{e}$? $\underline{e}$ can be taken in a variety of ways with varying strength and weakness.

The weakest sense of religious diversity simply recognizes the obvious truth of widespread religious diversity:

> The Weak Religious Diversity Claim (WRD): (a) Apparently sincere and equally cognitively capable truth-seekers reach widely divergent ("incompatible") conclusions about the nature of ultimate reality.[15]

The moderate sense makes claims about the apparent sincerity, intellectual acuity and moral progress of practioners of various religions:

> The Moderate Religious Diversity Claim (MRD): (a) Apparently sincere and equally cognitively capable truth-seekers reach widely divergent ("incompatible") conclusions about the nature of ultimate reality. (b) The religious convictions of the major religions inspire their adherents to significant moral transformation.

The strong sense makes similar judgments to MRD but adds that the various religious traditions are roughly equal in transformational effectiveness:

> The Strong Religious Diversity Claim (SRD): (a) Apparently sincere and equally cognitively capable truth-seekers reach widely divergent ("incompatible") conclusions about the nature of ultimate reality. (b) There is a variety of religious traditions which are equally successful in the significant moral transformation of human lives. (c) There is a variety of religious traditions which, so far as we can tell, are equally successful in the spiritual transformation of human lives.

Hick, of course, takes SRD as evidence.

How one acquires the evidence is also a factor in whether or not one adjudges the evidence to be WRD, MRD or SRD. WRD is indisputable and can be acquired by a variety of means — anecdote, reading one's holy writ, through a textbook, watching the news. MRD and SRD require that one make assessments of the moral and intellectual character of participants of other religions; one must adjudge, for example, whether or not adherents of competing religious traditions are sincere. Additionally, one must make judgments about the moral and spiritual progress that others have made. Often one acquires MRD or SRD as new evidence if one meets a devout practitioner of a different religious tradition. Knowledge by acquaintance of sincere believers in competing religious beliefs often prompts reevaluation of one's own religious beliefs.

According to Bayes' theorem the probability of a hypothesis is determined by the hypothesis's explanatory power and its prior probability. Let us consider these in order.

(a) **Explanatory Power.** A hypothesis has explanatory power if it makes the evidence more likely than it would be in the absence of the

hypothesis. This is indicated by:

$$\frac{P(e/h\&k)}{P(e/k)}$$

The greater the likelihood of the evidence given the hypothesis, that is the greater $P(e/h\&k)$, the greater the explanatory power of a hypothesis. Also the more unlikely the evidence is on general background knowledge, the greater the explanatory power. If the hypothesis only slightly raises the probability of the evidence over that given on background knowledge alone, that is if $P(e/h\&k)$ is only slightly greater than $P(e/k)$, then the explanatory power of the hypothesis is only slight.

Let us assume, not unreasonably, that e is not likely given k. For the sake of this argument let us assume, again not unreasonably I believe, that hypotheses H_1-H_4 have equal explanatory power with respect to the Weak Religious Diversity Claim: H_1-H_4 explain equally well what, given general background knowledge, is otherwise unexplained. That is $P(e/H_1\&k) = P(e/H_2\&k) = P(e/H_3\&k) = P(e/H_4\&k)$. Since they have equal explanatory power, none of the competing hypotheses is any more likely than any other given WRD.

If we take the Moderate Diversity Claim as evidence, again H_1-H_4 are roughly equal in explanatory power. H_1 and H_2, The Kantian and Cultural Filter Explanations, seem unproblematic: because it is God (or Ultimate Reality) that people believe themselves to be encountering or becoming aware of and because judgments are made by various practitioners of competing religions that God (or Ultimate Reality) is moral and that transformation is attained by aligning themselves with or availing themselves of God (or Ultimate Reality), the motivation to be moral is clear. H_1 and H_2 may lead one to expect significant moral transformation. It is not so clear if a practioner of religion were to come to believe H_1, the Kantian Explanation, that the motivation to be moral would remain strong; I shall discuss this in the final section of this essay. The Perversity Explanation has lower explanatory power than H_1 or H_2 given MRD as it attributes false religious beliefs to the moral or spiritual defect of the believer. While this hypothesis would lead one to expect widely divergent religious beliefs, one might not expect significant moral transformation. But, again, one might recognize that practioners of "perverse" religions would still believe themselves to be relating properly to God or Ultimate Reality; so one might still be able to account for some significant moral transformation on the part of believers of traditions that one considers perverse. Perversity might be used to explain what an individual considers odd moral and spiritual beliefs, say, the reverence of cows, cannibalism or widow-burning, etc. What one adjudges as moral deficiencies may be attributed to spiritual perversity. Similar concessions might be made for H_4, The Epistemically Privileged Explanation. Adjudged moral deficiencies would be attributed to lack of information and moral successes to sufficient information to allow for significant moral transformation. Widely divergent religious beliefs would be attributed not to difference in the cognitive capabilities or to

the lack of sincerity of the various inquirers, but to an increase of information on the part of one party of inquirers.

If one accepts The Strong Religious Diversity Claim (SRD), the explanatory power of the competing hypotheses is no longer roughly equal. Although H_1 and H_2 may be roughly equal in leading one to expect SRD, H_3 and H_4 clearly are not. H_3 and H_4 would not lead one to expect that various religious traditions would be equally successful in the moral and spiritual transformation of human lives. If one were to attribute religious diversity to perversity or ignorance, then one would surely not expect competing traditions to be equally successful in the spiritual transformation of human lives. If one were to accept SRD, then one might be rationally compelled to reject H_3 or H_4; I shall argue in the next section, however, that those who are antecedently committed to H_3 or H_4 are not likely to accept SRD as true.

There is another relevant factor in the determination of rationality as understood by the Bayesian. The hypothesis in question must not only explain otherwise inexplicable data, the hypothesis must also have:

(b) **Prior Probability.** According to Bayes' theorem, the hypothesis in question must have some antecedent likelihood given our general background knowledge. This is represented by the following portion of Bayes' Theorem:

$$P(h/k)$$

What is the probability of the hypothesis in question given general background knowledge? There are many wildly implausible candidates for explanation of the data that are not considered worthy of rational scrutiny because they fail the test of prior probability. No matter how well they explain the data, when multiplied by the low probability assigned $P(h/k)$, their consequent probability will be likewise low. This is analogous to William James's point that hypotheses for consideration must be living.[16]

The crucial question is what is one allowed to consider as general background knowledge, $\underline{k}$? If one considers only tautologies, as does Richard Swinburne in his famous probabilistic argument for the existence of God, then one will be no further ahead.[17] I don't see how one could make any reasonable assignment of probabilities to H_1-H_4 on the basis of tautologies. Even if there were an objective, a priori probability of these hypotheses, I don't see how anyone could reasonably claim to know or to have a reasonable belief about what that probability is.[18] If we are left to making judgments on the basis of mere tautological evidence then we must remain agnostic about which of the competing hypotheses, H_1-H_4, is more likely than its competitors.

Let us, therefore, expand $\underline{k}$ to include not only tautologies but all of our rationally justified beliefs.[19] Why exclude any relevant evidence from the evaluation of hypotheses? If our goal is getting at the truth, then why not bring all that we know or justifiably believe to bear on the evaluation of hypotheses? This seems to me the strategy taken, for example, in science where one no longer seriously considers theories which postulate fairies, telepathic penguins, crystalline spheres or

imponderable fluids. The preference for naturalistic and mechanistic explanations is not justifiable on a priori grounds for tautologous evidence is indifferent to quarks and fairies; rather, plausibility judgments are made a posteriori on the basis of other propositions that one justifiably believes. Let us then expand $\underline{k}$ to include all relevant background beliefs. Thus expanded, $\underline{k}$ will allow one to sort amongst the competing hypotheses, H_1-H_4, to determine plausible candidates for consideration.

Suppose that one is brought up in a particular religious tradition to hold certain beliefs about God, or that one comes to hold certain beliefs about God on the basis of a putative religious experience, or that one makes the considered and sober judgment that the best explanation of a variety of factors is that God, as described by a specific religious tradition, exists. In any of these cases one's belief in God as specified will be *prima facie* justified, or so it seems to me. Relevant justifying conditions include accepting things on the testimony of those whom one trusts, on the basis of experiences, or on the basis of inference to best explanation of a variety of data. In the case of religious belief, one typically affirms that God or Ultimate Reality really is or is like the way he or it have been described by one tradition or another. That is, most religious believers are realists concerning their beliefs about God or Ultimate Reality. If most believers have *prima facie* justified beliefs about God or Ultimate Reality that are realist in import, then it is appropriate for such believers to include such beliefs in their respective $\underline{k}$s.

Consider once again The Weak Religious Diversity Claim (WRD). Suppose we are evaluating H_1, the Kantian Explanation of the Religious Diversity Claim. If $\underline{k}$ includes realistic beliefs about God then $P(H_1/k)$ will be low. And the consequent probability of H_1, given WRD, will likewise be low. That is, it will not be reasonable, for one in this epistemic situation, to affirm H_1. Three options remain for the religious Bayesian: The Cultural Filter Explanation, H_2; The Perversity Explanation, H_3; and The Epistemologically Privileged Explanation, H_4. Given their roughly equal explanatory power with respect to WRD, which of these is reasonable for one to believe given WRD will, once again, be determined by one's justified background beliefs. If $\underline{k}$ includes justified beliefs about God (realistically construed) and about the lack of revelation granted to some people, then one may reasonably adjudge that $P(H_4/k)$ is high (relative to its competitors); if $\underline{k}$ includes justified beliefs about God (realistically construed) and attributes unbelief to pride, for example, one may reasonably adjudge that $P(H_3/k)$ is high (relative to its competitors). And considerations could likewise lead one to reasonably adjudge that $P(H_2/k)$ is high (relative to its competitors). Whichever hypothesis H_2, H_3 or H_4 one adjudges as high given their $\underline{k}$, one will also reasonably affirm as the best overall hypothesis for the explanation of the WRD.

The problem for Hick's Kantian Explanation, H_1, is this: if $\underline{k}$ rightly includes *prima facie* justified religious beliefs, most of which for most ordinary believers are realist, then it won't be rational for most believers to affirm that $P(H_1/k)$ is higher than $P(H_2/k)$, $P(H_3/k)$ or $P(H_4/k)$. Indeed they will affirm the opposite. And if so, it will not be reasonable,

given that H₁-H₄ explain equally well the WRD, for them to affirm H_1 given their total evidence. Given the background beliefs of most ordinary believers (those that are realists about their religious beliefs), the only likely beliefs, and hence the only reasonable beliefs, concerning religious diversity, are H_2-H_4. Similar judgments will be made if we take the Moderate Religious Diversity Claim (MRD) as evidence.

Finally let us consider the Strong Religious Diversity Claim (SRD).[20] H_1 surely explains SRD but I shall raise a problem concerning the rational acceptability of SRD in the next section. H_2 might lead one to expect SRD as well. But given H_3 and H_4 one would not expect SRD. H_4 attributes religious diversity to ignorance and it seems extremely unlikely that the ignorant would be as successful at spiritual transformation as the epistemically privileged. H_3, The Perversity Explanation, attributes theological error to conative error. If a religious group held false beliefs about God not merely out of ignorance but on the basis of bad will, it is unlikely that such beliefs would serve equally well in the transformation of lives as true beliefs and good will. That is, the probability of SRD is low on H_3. If SRD is accepted, one must update one's prior commitments. If SRD is taken as true, a reasonable person who antecedently held H_3 or H_4 would have to decrease her confidence in H_3 and H_4 and increase confidence in either H_1 or H_2.

There is, of course, a proviso that must be met by our rational believings. So far all that has been claimed is that hypotheses H_1-H_4 are likely given WRD or MRD if certain of one's religious beliefs are *prima facie* justified. But *prima facie* justification can be defeated by other beliefs that one entertains, holds or should hold. So if one were to come to be persuaded by, say, the argument from evil or by J. L. Mackie's cumulative argument against theism, then perhaps one ought reasonably to shift from H_1-H_4 to atheism or agnosticism. If one were persuaded of Kantian epistemology on independent grounds, then one ought to affirm the Kantian Explanation, H_1. Given that defeaters are relative to noetic structures, people with varying beliefs will be affected by alleged defeaters in a variety of different ways. There is a great deal more to be said about defeaters which I shall pass over here.[21]

The question which I would like to raise here is this: Is the widespread disagreement of equally sincere truth-seekers a defeater of H_2, H_3 or H_4? Is the fact of religious diversity, WRD or MRD, a defeater for realist interpretations of religious belief? The answer, so it seems to me, is clearly "No". Equally sincere truth seekers often disagree about significant matters of belief. Einstein disagreed with his contemporaries about theories of indeterminism. Amongst biologists there is disagreement about whether selection is genotypic or phenotypic. Widely variant political philosophies are held by serious thinkers of every stripe. Even when there is agreement about the basic structure of political theory, disagreement persists concerning the best social structures for attaining agreed upon goals. Psychologists and philosophers have divergent views on the nature of persons. And there is tremendous variation in moral beliefs. The more the questions involved are centrally human the more there is rational disagreement. It does not follow from the mere

fact of disagreement, of course, that there is no fact of the matter in these domains of human knowledge. There may or may not be; there are other, realist explanations of rational disagreement, perhaps attributing disagreement to the ignorance of one of the parties involved. There are more or less agreed upon ways of achieving rational consensus among scientists; but just because there is not an agreed upon strategy for achieving consensus in more fundamentally human questions, say of morality or God, it does not follow that some people aren't justified in holding their respective beliefs. Rational people rationally disagree; that's just a fact we have to live with. It doesn't follow, however, that some people aren't rationally justified.

By following a rational decision procedure, like Bayes' theorem, we may be able to determine which, of a competing set of hypotheses, is more likely given our current evidential state; which proposition is rightly adjudged more likely than its competitors will be *a fortiori* the more reasonable proposition for us to believe (on the assumption that we have paid due homage to defeaters). What should our stance be towards beliefs thus justified? Should we think our Bayesian justified beliefs are merely how things seem to us but not the way things really are? I think not. When we make judgments about which propositions are more likely than others, we are really inquiring into which beliefs are more likely to be true. There is a link between belief and truth: beliefs aim at the truth. Our beliefs are often our best assessment of the way things are. We believe because it seems to us that our beliefs are true, or likely to be true, or more likely to be true than their competitors. The telos of belief is truth. Bayesian rationality is our attempt, based on our total evidence, of gaining access to the truth. We should hold such justified beliefs to be true. What other stance should one hold towards one's beliefs? That they are false? If we believe something, we believe it to be true.

IV

We have seen that religious diversity can be taken in at least three ways — weak, moderate and strong. In this section I shall argue that, although SRD would require a shift in initial commitments for those who accept H_3 or H_4, such people are not typically in a position to be rationally justified in accepting SRD; indeed, hardly anyone is in a position to accept SRD.

SRD requires that one make judgments not only about the moral practices of practitioners of various religious traditions but also of their sincerity and character. One must adjudge that persons, who hold religious beliefs that are widely divergent from one's own, have undergone significant moral transformations. It is not sufficient to judge that such persons' outward actions are just or righteous for a wicked person can appear just or righteous. To make the judgment of significant moral transformation one must also believe that behind good actions lies a virtuous character or noble motives. One can't tell simply by looking if another person is virtuous. One might look at a person whom a particular religious group admires as a moral saint and judge that such a per-

son's motives were ignoble. For example, if one holds the perversity explanation and learns of the astounding moral practices of a practitioner of another religion (say of stylactites or of extreme self-abnegation), one might judge that such persons were simply trying to impress their followers or future generations, or incur the gods' favor in order to gain eternal bliss; supposing further that they believed that justification is by faith and not by works, they may judge that such actions are manifestations of crass self-interest and demean them rather than value them.

Consider how one would judge transformational success if one held Hick's view, H_1. To know or reasonably judge that people are being transformed demands that we be able to peak behind the curtain. We need to know if someone is really being transformed. Since some religions place transformation (at least partly) in the next life, we can't know *ante mortem* if such religions are equally successful at transformation. Other religions may make people more moral; but whether or not they are successful at spiritual transformation is beyond our ken. Even judgments of moral transformation require a peek behind the veil of actions into human motivation; this sort of access is denied by Kantians. We cannot see if people are motivated by respect for the moral law; if not, we cannot judge if their respective actions are of genuine moral worth or not. Hick's Kantian agnosticism precludes access to any of the relevant sorts of information. We can neither know nor reasonably judge if anyone is successful at moral or spiritual transformation. The point again—one cannot judge transformational effectiveness simply by seeing. Appearances are not sufficient. We lack access both to the *post-mortem* goals of transformation and to the fundamental principle of a person's action. We are simply not in an epistemic position to make judgments about the equal success of differing religious beliefs at moral and spiritual transformation. According to Hick's views, it seems that people should be agnostic about the transformational success of the various religious traditions and, hence, cannot rationally accept MRD or SRD.

Suppose, however, that I am a practitioner of a particular religion. I have been taught my beliefs by my parents and other adults that I respect from childhood onwards. I have participated in liturgy that reinforces my views on the transformative powers of reality and feel cleansed, made whole and at peace with reality. I see significant spiritual transformation in the lives of those who are members of my community. I read literature and holy writ that attest to and confirm my view of reality. I develop my beliefs about both the goal and the process of transformation and these beliefs are arguably justified for me. Now suppose that I am in a position where I must judge whether or not other religious traditions are equally transformationally effective. Surely I will not be forced, by dint of experience, to judge that people whose practices and goals are widely divergent from mine are just as successful at putting them in touch with Ultimate Reality and attaining transformation. I will almost certainly question their beliefs and practices, find them strange, perhaps bizarre, and most likely believe them to be mistaken. My antecedent commitments prevent me from judging that my belief competitors are just as transformationally successful as my beliefs.

In this case of theory-laden observation, believing is seeing.

I argued in the previous section that if almost anyone were to accept SRD as true, they may be required to hold H_1 or H_2, the Kantian or the Cultural Filters Explanations of religious diversity. The argument of this section shows that few people who accept H_3 or H_4 however, would be obliged to accept SRD as true; hence few people who accept H_3 or H_4 will be rationally obliged to revise their beliefs accordingly. Furthermore, if Hick's Kantian views are correct, no human being is in a position to justifiably believe that any religion is transformationally successful; therefore, no human being is obliged to accept SRD; hence, no human being is under a rational obligation to affirm H_1 or H_2 on the basis of SRD.

V

Although I have defended the rationality of holding a realist account of one's religious beliefs, I have neither disproved Hick's view nor demonstrated the rational preferability of one religion over any other. All I have claimed is that if one has warranted realistic views about God antecedently to becoming aware of the weak or moderate claims of religious diversity, then one is reasonable in maintaining one's realistic views about God and to reject Hick's Kantian Explanation. Whatever warranted beliefs about God one has antecedently, be they Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or Taoist, will remain warranted in the face of the claims of religious diversity. And believers in each of these traditions will be warranted in affirming that their beliefs are true of God *an sich*. In spite of all that, Hick's Kantian Explanation might nonetheless still be true.

I would like to raise one final, pragmatic, problem with Hick's view: If Hick's Kantian Explanation were propounded and accepted, the transformational power of their religious tradition would be undermined for most ordinary believers. This is, I maintain, a curious pragmatic defeater of Hick's views. His views are appealing in part because of their transformational generosity — a wide variety of traditions is endorsed as equally likely at securing for its adherents transformation. The key question for religious beliefs is their ability to transform one from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Indeed he applies this pragmatic test to the grading of religions.[22] If it can be argued that one's transformational prospects are diminished if one accepts his views, then a significant pragmatic advantage of the Kantian Explanation is in peril.

Let me proceed by way of example. My children rise up very early on Easter morning eager to scurry about the house to discover the many treasures left by the Easter bunny. Baskets filled to the brim, they plunge in and consume as much of the gratuitous plunder as their indulgent parents allow. It is for them a source of anticipation, excitement and delight; one that pries their sleepy eyes open and their groggy bodies out of bed and moves them to spring into action. In the not too distant future, however, one of their school mates will gleefully inform them that it's all a lie. After that, the candy might motivate early rising

for a while but they will quickly realize that the candy will be there whether they get up early or not. The anticipation and excitement will fade, the delight diminish. They will quickly grow out of that belief and the motivating power that it once had on them. And their parents will no longer give them their candy.

After they have munched on their candy, we put on our Sunday best and rush off to Church to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. They will hear that God loves them so much that he sent his only Son to die for them on the cross, and that he has obtained victory over sin, death and the devil, and that he has sent the Holy Spirit into their lives to secure the transactions that were settled on the cross. The view of human nature espoused by them and by Hick is that human beings are unduly devoted to the self, perhaps even in bondage to the self. And they believe that there is a God who loves justice and wishes them to be just. Their transformation from self-centeredness to God-centeredness will require, so they will come to believe, mighty acts on the part of God.

Now suppose that they learn that ultimate reality cannot be discovered and that they don't know whether God is really a person or not, or loving and just, or even good or evil. Perhaps he/it/whatever doesn't care about their transformation from self-centeredness into Reality-centeredness (perhaps it is a category mistake to apply the property of caring to this being). Whether or not he/it/nothing is actually concerned about human transformation is an enigma. Is Reality concerned for human welfare or transformation at all? Your guess is as good as mine. We aren't allowed a peek behind that veil either.

I have little doubt that my son, if thus apprised, will not be of such iron will to continue rising up early for worship. I suspect that he will no longer avail himself of prayer. He will not develop an attitude of thanksgiving towards the gifts of life. In short he will cut himself off from the means of grace of his religious tradition. The problem cuts even deeper. If he is not persuaded that reality is ultimately just and loving, he may lose incentive to pursue love and justice himself. Indeed, if he does not perceive reality as just, he may reasonably affirm that he needs to protect his own interests at all costs. That is, he may reasonably come to believe that Thrasymachus is right in claiming that justice is the interest of the other, but is an obstacle to one's own happiness. And why not? If there is no final reckoning, why not grab for all the gusto now?

Human beings, so it seems to me, are so constructed that they need hope that their moral and spiritual efforts are not in vain. To have that hope we must believe that reality is such that it enables or even empowers us to move from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness. To believe that ultimate reality may be, for all we know, indifferent or hostile to human purposes, is demoralizing — one's best moral and spiritual efforts might in the end come to nothing. If so, it is likely that one will falter on the steps toward transformation. Human beings must believe that there is a reality that undergirds their beliefs and actions which makes human transformation possible.

The Kantian Explanation takes away that reality and offers instead appearance all the while holding that ultimate reality is a mystery.

However human beings cannot center their lives around the something-we-know-not-what. Agnosticism about the ultimate structures of moral and spiritual reality defeats the hope necessary for moral and spiritual growth. The problem is that our so-called experience of God, according to this view, allows us no access to reality. The more our experiences of God are perceived as mere appearance, essentially a product of the human limits to understanding, more phantom than person or fact, the less they are perceived as revealing the nature of things and the less likely they are to achieve their transformational purpose. Interpretive schemes concerning human welfare and meaning work best if they are believed to be true. Only thus conceived are they likely to free us from ourselves and draw us into a community of love, justice and freedom.

Even if my son were to embrace a Kantian understanding of religious belief, his moral and spiritual demise is not inevitable. He may retain Christian morality in the absence of classical Christian metaphysics. Indeed, Professor Hick is an admirable model in this regard. But my son's children and his children's children are even less likely to retain the beliefs which are psychologically necessary for the motivation of moral and spiritual transformation. The long term demoralizing effects of Kantian agnosticism seem abundantly clear.

It may be, in spite of these pragmatic considerations, that the Kantian Explanation is true and that we simply have no idea if God is concerned about and structures reality for the improvement of human welfare. But if my argument is correct, when it comes to at least the weak and moderate Religious Diversity Claims, neither has any explanatory advantage over any of the realist explanations of religious belief. Even if all things were equal among the competing hypotheses, pragmatic considerations would tell against Hick's Kantian Explanation.

I said at the beginning of the section that in spite of my arguments, Hick's Kantian Explanation of religious diversity might nonetheless be true. I have argued in this section, however, that if accepted, Hick's views would undermine the hope necessary for the transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Even if Hick's Kantian understanding of Reality is right, he should just keep it to himself.[23]

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NOTES

1. For a discussion of transcendence which affirms knowledge of God, see Kelly James Clark, "Knowing the Unknowable," *Books and Culture*, September/October 1997.

2. John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan Press, 1985), 39.

3. Hick, 39.

4. At least according to his earlier writings; he rejects this view, as we shall see, in his later writings.

5. Hick, 41.

6. I shall continue to refer to this as a Kantian view, although I don't

believe that it is Kant's view. Kant contends that we ought to and can have true beliefs about God as he is in himself. To live as we ought to live, we must have realist beliefs about God. Indeed, his argument is analogous to the argument that I offer in the final section of this essay.

7.   John Hick, *The Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1989), 246-247.

8.   The problem in interpreting Hick is twofold. He sometimes makes an epistemological claim: It is impossible for us to have justified beliefs about Reality. In other contexts he seems to make linguistic or metaphysical claims: God is so wholly other that no humanly available categories apply to him; all talk about God, according to this view, is either false or nonsensical.

9.   I am grateful to my colleague, Gregory "The Mellowman" Mellema, for suggesting this term. He, better than anyone I know, has his ear to the ground for hip philosophical terms.

10.   Perhaps we "tame" God by making transformation simpler (it is by faith rather than works), or by puffing up our capacity to attain transformation (God is against whatever vices — smoking, drinking and swearing — are not temptations to those who believe), or by turning God into an advocate for one's own causes (individual or national election). There is a natural human tendency to attend to and develop those beliefs which conduce to our own interests; to that end we may create God in our own image in order to feel good about our transformational prospects.

11.   There are two senses in which Hick's account may be realist. First, one's experiences of the divine are real (as experiences but not as indicative of Reality). Second, there is something (although it is illegitimate to call it an it or a thing) beyond the realm of experience that is the cause of our varying perceptions of Reality. That is, there is a belief-independent reality.

12.   See for example, Bas Van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

13.   Perhaps they are justified, but non-epistemically, say, by the weight of tradition or by ethno-centrism.

14.   Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1985), 96.

15.   I use scare-quotes to modify 'incompatible.' If religious claims are just about appearances then there can be no real incompatibility.

16.   William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover, 1956), 1-31.

17.   Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979) see especially 64-69.

18.   For a discussion of these and related issues, see my "The Explanatory Power of Theism," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 25 (1989): 129-146.

19.   Excluding e; if e were included, the probability of e given e and any of the competing hypotheses will be 1.

20.   I am grateful to Anna Maidens and the two anonymous referees for raising this issue.

21.   For a discussion of the nature of defeaters, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40-42, 230-234.

22.   See Hick's essay "On Grading Religions" in *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, especially 79-91.

23.   I am grateful for helpful comments from Mark Nelson, two anonymous referees and especially the members of the Calvin College Philosophy Departmental Colloquium.