A theological alternative to Grube's notion of 'justified religious difference'

Luco J. van den Brom

Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
Email: ljvandenbrom@home.nl

Abstract

Grube proposes a framework for respectful dealing with different religions: 'justified religious difference. The author comments on the epistemic setting of Grube's thesis. It testifies a cognitive approach to religious faith by handling religious faith and epistemic belief as analogous argument. His criticism of the pluralist approach is not very convincing. This framework is too abstract for an interreligious dialogue. The author proposes a concept of religious faith within a web of practices, liturgical rituals. A concrete interreligious dialogue can enrich the Christian faith in its practical styling.

Keywords: religious diversity, interreligious dialogue, pluralist hypothesis, non-traditional epistemology, faith as personal knowledge

Modern Western societies show a plurality of activities of different religious traditions. In the first part of the twentieth century, Europe was called a Christian continent and other religions used to belong to other continents. In contrast, the twenty-first-century street scene of most European big cities is characterized by the presence of different faiths. These faiths are often practiced one next to another. Interestingly, in spite of the differences in their practices, adherents of these religions recognize each other's practices as religious time and again. This is a striking phenomenon because we cannot easily define what religion is. Not only do we call, e.g. Judaism, Christianity, Islam or Hinduism religions, but also Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Sikhism.

However, upon comparing religions, it is difficult to find some common elements as essentially defining characteristics which we might consider as the common denominator of 'all' religions. That is, we can observe that some of these specific religions share many characteristics but differ in any concrete instance of a comparison. Therefore, we should talk about religions in Wittgensteinian terminology of 'family resemblances': each religion shares some characteristics with any other religion, but there are no characteristics shared by *all*. In other words, we cannot define 'religion' as this or that sort of thing in order to distinguish between true and false religion.[1] In his inaugural lecture, Professor Dirk-Martin Grube proposes a framework for dealing with different religions: he calls this framework 'justified religious difference' which 'allows for tolerance and respect for other religions than the home religion' (419). This framework is based on the non-traditional epistemological perspective with which Grube agrees. Non-traditional epistemology is based upon the insight that we may call someone's belief of *p* a case of knowing *p* if her belief of *p* originates in reliable cognitive procedures given her circumstances. According to Grube, she is *justified* in holding the belief that *p* if she has carefully collected the available evidence of the belief for *p*.

Therefore, whether someone is justified to hold the belief that *p* depends on the epistemological circumstances and perspectives that that person happens to be in. According to Grube, the most important implication is that different epistemological perspectives 'allow to justify different but *equally* legitimate beliefs … on the same issue' (423; emphasis added). Thus, we may expect a plurality of different legitimate beliefs which allows us to acknowledge legitimate 'otherness' in epistemological perspectives. Because of this insight, Grube attacks biased explanations which do not acknowledge the possibility of genuine 'otherness' as being justifiably different. His framework for dealing with different *religious* viewpoints is based on the application of the same epistemological insight in a religious context, so that different religious perspectives may allow the justification of holding different legitimate *religious beliefs*. 'As little as we have to condemn all deviant beliefs as being false – if we acknowledge justified difference, we do not have to condemn all deviant religious beliefs as being false – if we acknowledge justified difference in religion' (424). Grube is of the opinion that many pluralist approaches to religious diversity attempt to minimize the differences between the divergent religions. With that purpose in view, pluralists such as John Hick postulate a unity between or beyond the different religions: Hick's proposal is to consider the major world religions as related to a transcendent '*Real an sich*', as 'an ultimate divine Reality' which lies behind or beyond all the varied visions of it. If within the perspective of one's own religious tradition all forms of religious experience can be seen in one way or another as a cognitive response to a divine reality, it is rationally justified to have the same attitude towards religious experiences of other traditions, according to Hick.[2] In a sense we may agree with Grube that Hick is minimizing and ignoring the characteristic differences between the divergent religions: as noumenon the '*Real an sich*' is unknowable and indescribable. This notion is basic for Hick's model in order to be all-encompassing for all religions by transcending the contradictory claims of divergent religions: the '*Real an sich*' functions as a religious umbrella concept.

Hick's 'pluralistic hypothesis' presents a *monotypic* form of religious reductionism because at the end of the day all major religions relate to the same '*Real*'. However, a 'pluralist hypothesis' tries to justify all sorts of religious perspectives as equally valid. To justify a religious perspective, we need a broader context that supplies us with criteria to evaluate that perspective. How to justify Hick's all-encompassing 'pluralist hypothesis' as a religious perspective? We cannot justify it in its *own* terms, because then it is justified by definition. A pluralist paradigm seems to transcend its own specific perspective by providing a new framework that may be the context of all contexts. Such a God's Eye point of view as a View From Nowhere is not available for human observers and therefore meaningless.[3]

Grube's own critique goes one step further and concerns a presupposition which pluralists may share, that is the principle of *bivalence*. This principle states that declarative statements have one and not more than one truth value: they are *either* true *or* false. In the present context of how to deal with religious diversity, this principle causes problems in the interreligious dialogue. It implies that if position A is true and position B differs from A, B *must* be false: given a bivalent logic, there is no choice. However, this seems a problematic presentation of bivalent logic? Position B can only deny position A either if B is equivalent to non-A or if B implies non-A. This principle of bivalence implies an *equation between difference and falsity*, according to Grube. The consequence of this putative presupposition is devastating in the interreligious dialogue: if interlocutors discover genuine differences

between their religions, they *have to* consider each other's religion to be false, even though pluralists would prefer otherwise. Therefore pluralists 'are driven … to downplay difference since difference is taken to equal falsity' (421) and to stress the similarities between religions. However, Grube does not provide any arguments in support of this putative pluralist presupposition of the principle of *bivalence*. Instead, he merely says: 'I suspect that many pluralist … attempts presuppose this equation' (421).

'Being suspicious' is not a logical but psychological argument! It tells about Grube's opinion but nothing about the special logic presupposed by the pluralist model of religion such as that defended by John Hick, say. Hick rejects both a sceptical and an exclusivist view on religious experience and proposes a third possibility, namely that the great faiths constitute different ways of experiencing an ultimate divine Reality. He illustrates the fruitfulness of his proposal by means of several examples which can be dealt with by his pluralistic hypothesis. Hick's hypothesis is an ontological claim, whereas Grube rejects the putative logic of the pluralists – i.e. the two-value or bivalent logic – by agreeing with Joseph Margolis's proposal to use a multi-valued logic. And then – to my amazement – he *changes the subject* and leaves the topic of logic and ontology and continues to speak on the *epistemological* notion of justification. Such an epistemological starting point in the interreligious dialogue implies that the interlocutors are open to religious otherness and will listen to deviant religious insights given the possibility that they can be justified given the epistemic circumstances of the believers who hold them. So far so good.

Grube's proposal of a framework for dealing with religious diversity presupposes that interlocutors have reflected upon what justifies them in holding their beliefs in their *epistemic* circumstances. The basic assumption of 'justified religious difference' is Grube's conviction that we can handle 'religious belief' and 'epistemic belief' in an analogous way. We can argue in support of our epistemic belief that, e.g., the moon is spherical and not flat by means of rational interpretations of our observations, given our epistemic circumstances. And in an analogous way, it is possible to argue that religious beliefs might be reasonable, given our religious epistemic circumstances – although not reasonable for everybody perhaps. Here, there is at least a conceptual difficulty, however. Religious belief and epistemic belief are not simply equivalent although we use the same sign 'belief'. Epistemic belief involves knowledge of propositions on how to do something ('practical knowledge') or on what to expect sometime somewhere ('knowledge by description'). However, it is also meaningful to say 'I know her in person'. This statement does not mean that I can reproduce a complete set of statements about this person but that I am familiar with this person. Analytic philosophers call this kind of knowledge 'knowledge by acquaintance'.

Religious belief is comparable to such 'knowledge by acquaintance', namely that is on the basis of some personal confrontation with specific religious practices. The historian of theology Robert Wilken writes about the conversion of Justin Martyr. He observes that, according to Justin, the message of Christ enters the life of a person on two levels: the moral and the intellectual level. 'The knowledge of God has to do with how one lives, with acting on convictions that are not mere premises but realities learned from *other* persons and tested by experience.'[4] This reminds me of the notion of Polanyi's 'personal knowledge': 'God is a commitment involved in our rites and myths. Through our integrative, imaginative efforts, we see him as the focal point that fuses into meaning all the incompatibles involved

in the practice of religion.'[5] One implication of Wilken's remark concerns the meaning of religious concepts and statements: the meaning of these basic religious elements and utterances can be learned from how believers live. *They* are the peers. Both religious rituals and moral behaviour inform us about what *this* faith is doing and what it means for the community of believers. However, Grube considers religious differences within an epistemological perspective by asking how believers could justify and legitimate their beliefs. It seems he is treating religious beliefs and statements like knowledge claims. In that light he suggests that 'different epistemological contexts … allow to justify different but equally legitimate beliefs' (423). And he goes even a step further: 'Once I have realized that you are *justified* in believing the religious beliefs you hold, there is no need to explain them' (425). I was amazed to hear that Grube leaves out the clause 'given *your* epistemic circumstances'. This clause seems crucial to me in Grube's argumentation on why to respect *you* in your religious otherness as my interlocutor, because I can agree that you are justified to hold your beliefs *given these special* circumstances.

In the last paragraph, Grube indicates that we need criteria which allow us to distinguish between justified and *un*justified religious differences. He is aware that he neglected the development of the criteria for making such a distinction which is very important to start an interreligious dialogue by understanding and making sense of each other's belief. Grube hopes to be able to take up this issue in the future! I will suggest a criterion, if I may. Imagine that religious beliefs and statements are never isolated knowledge claims but they are always part of a more encompassing way of life including particular religious rituals, ceremonies and other practices. Such practices also include a tradition of debate on how to cope with questions of life in a changing world and on the sense in which re-adjudgements of religious statements are possible and needed to maintain the viability of a faith. This means that talking about religion in general and religious diversity in broad and abstract terms neglects the actual network which individual religious rituals, practices or beliefs are part of. An interreligious dialogue is a conversation between adherents of particular religions, e.g. between Hindus and Muslims, between Jews and Christians, between Sikhs and Buddhists, etc. Nevertheless, even though Grube is focused solely on philosophical reasons for respecting other religions, he tries to make a strong case for his theoretical framework ('justified religious difference') in a sympathetic way. He avoids arguing from his own Christian commitment, but argues that he *knows* that others can be justified to hold their deviant beliefs. However, would he call *this* knowledge 'justified true belief' too? Such a premise would leave open the possibility that others could be *not* justified to hold deviant beliefs. Therefore I am confused by the remark in the last paragraph that there are religious differences which are *un*-justified. When would you be sure that your interlocutor is *not* justified to hold his deviant beliefs?

Grube creates this problem himself by generalizing his conversation about religious diversity, whereas the justification of a deviant epistemological perspective would only make sense in the case of a concrete particular perspective, i.e. the case of the perspective from within a particular faith. In that case, it is a real possibility that this specific religious perspective is justifiable. Simultaneously there is the real possibility that this perspective is not justifiable! I could ignore this last possibility but in that case would the concept of 'justified true beliefs' still enable me to participate in an interreligious dialogue as a sincere interlocutor who is capable 'to grasp the other's authentic being'? Being a Christian and a

theologian reflecting upon the Christian way of life I can raise the question why God the Father confronts me/us with Muslims and Hindus. What would God want to make unequivocally clear to these specific Christians about their religious perspective through people who hold their clearly deviant beliefs, and celebrate their clearly deviant ceremonies and rituals? I know these questions are typically theological but they are philosophically justifiable by stressing the notion of 'family resemblances' between empirical religions: in such interactions, Christianity may receive new impulses which can enrich Christian faith, liturgy, practices, spirituality, etc. Interreligious dialogue can be revealing for Christians!

Acknowledgement

Notes

1. See van den Brom, "God, Gödel and Trinity," 56–76, esp. 59.

2. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 235–238.

3. van den Brom, "God, Gödel and Trinity," 70–73.

4. Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 7; my italics.

5. Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*, 156.

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Additional author information

Luco J. van den Brom

Prof. Dr. Luco J. van den Brom (1946) is Extraordinary Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Pretoria, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at the Dutch Protestant Theological University Groningen, Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology at University of Groningen. He publishes on philosophical and doctrinal theology, on science and religion and fundamental theology.