Religious Pluralism
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Religious pluralism is one of the most vibrant topics within current philosophy of religion. This is in part due to the increasingly multi-, or poly-, cultural environment within which philosophy of religion is now practised and taught. More importantly though, it is because thinking about theories of religious pluralism requires that one engage with some of the deepest and most interesting questions lying at the heart of philosophy in general—questions about philosophical methodology, the nature of truth, logic, and language. While this chapter examines one highly influential form of religious pluralism and reviews some criticisms of that form, it seeks to go beyond a surface level discussion of the pros and cons of any particular pluralist theory in order to show where the deeper philosophical issues lie. I begin with some terminological considerations which will clarify further the focus of this chapter.

The Relationship between Pluralism and Diversity

'Pluralism' is a concept whose meaning is highly context-sensitive. It is used in a startling variety of ways both within popular discourse and within different academic disciplines (Hare and Harrison, forthcoming). Underlying this variety two basic understandings of the relationship between diversity and pluralism can be discerned. According to one understanding of this relationship, pluralism is simply a positive attitude towards diversity and a pluralist is one who adopts such an attitude. This stance, which I shall call 'attitudinal pluralism,' although it might also aptly be termed 'affective pluralism,' captures the common-sense view that a pluralist is someone who tolerates diversity; however, taken on its own, it does not do justice to the richness of meanings conveyed by the word 'pluralism' in ordinary discourse or to the way in which the term is currently used within philosophy of religion. According to the other understanding of the relationship between diversity and pluralism, pluralism is a higher-level theoretical response to diversity. Here I shall call this type of stance

'methodological pluralism.' Methodological pluralism is the chief concern of this chapter.

Both attitudinal and methodological pluralism are responses to diversity, the former is primarily an emotional response whereas the latter is a theoretical response. That diversity elicits such responses alerts us to the fact that in certain domains, especially, but by no means exclusively, the religious and the ethical, protracted failure to reach agreement about core issues on the part of those whom we might reasonably consider to be epistemic peers is often regarded as problematic and as requiring some explanation.

Disagreement

A key philosophical puzzle raised by religious diversity arises from protracted and seemingly intractable disagreement on the part of those subscribing to different religious belief systems. Adherents of different religions disagree about key issues, such as whether or not there is a God, whether or not the universe had a beginning, and whether or not humans have immortal souls. There are also major disagreements within religious traditions concerning, for example, the nature of God and our own post-mortem destiny.

Why are such disagreements among and within religious traditions thought to be so problematic? At the most basic level, if one person holds *X* and another holds *not-X*, it might seem to be a simple consequence of logic that at most only one of them can be correct. Likewise, if we extend this consideration to belief systems as a whole, it might appear that if two belief systems disagree on some issue (the immortality of the soul, for example), at most one of them can be correct. As Bertrand Russell observed, '[i]t is evident as a matter of logic that, since [the great religions of the world] disagree, not more than one of them can be true' (Russell 1957, xi). This spectre of logical contradiction is often seen as the core of the philosophical problem generated by the existence of a diversity of religious belief systems holding mutually inconsistent beliefs. It would seem that, under pain of logical contradiction, at most one religious belief system can be correct. However, given the state of the available evidence, many hold that disagreement about which of these belief systems, if any, is in fact the correct one is irresolvable by rational means. As we shall see, it is this problem of apparently rational disagreement in matters of religious belief that

methodological pluralism seeks to address. Clearly, adequately addressing this problem requires more than adopting pluralism in the form of a positive attitude towards diversity.

The tenacious character of religious disagreements is sometimes taken to imply that there are no facts of the matter with reference to which these disagreements could be settled; religious belief is non-cognitive for it is not concerned with objectively accessible religious facts, as there are none. One taking this view may claim that religious utterances can be reinterpreted into, for example, statements about human psychology, emotions, or values. Lack of convergence in religious beliefs over time can be taken as evidence for such a judgement; although it need not be taken this way. Alternatively, in the face of protracted disagreement, one might hold the pluralist view that different religious conceptual schemata seek to make objectively true claims and do so more or less equally well, while explaining disagreement as a result of the difficulty of accessing the relevant facts. Such disagreement might be described as 'faultless' insofar as it has arisen due to the elusive nature of religious facts—the purported objects of religious beliefs—and, as such, it does not necessarily entail that any of the religious conceptual schemata are inadequate to these facts.

In a world in which people subscribing to different religious belief systems often live side-by-side, it would seem desirable to have a theory which did not entail either that all religious adherents are mistaken in their beliefs (as a non-cognitivist or a naturalist might hold) or that at most one of the religious belief systems could be substantially correct (as an exclusivist would hold). Methodological pluralism attempts to provide just such a theory, and in doing so it seeks to avoid a significant problem faced by attitudinal pluralism. An attitudinal pluralist, when confronted with a diversity of different belief systems each supporting apparently contradictory propositions, must adopt a positive attitude towards all of them while at the same time, if she is rational, holding that at best only one of the conflicting sets of belief can be true. In short the attitudinal pluralist may be accused of not taking the beliefs of others seriously by adopting a positive attitude towards all of them while assuming that most of them are in fact false. This is akin to the difficulty faced by those who argue for religious toleration when they are confronted with the objection that one only needs to tolerate that which one does not approve (see Schmidt-Leukel 2002 and Griffiths 2001, 101–11).

Methodological pluralism allows, but does not require, pluralists to maintain a positive attitude towards diverse belief systems (it is thus compatible with attitudinal pluralism) while holding that each system might be substantially correct even in cases where different belief systems appear to hold conflicting beliefs about the same issues.

Pluralism within Philosophy of Religion

Philosophers of religion often take religious pluralism to be the view that the core claims of more than one religious tradition can be true, or at least justifiably believed, even though different religious traditions assert the truth of diverse, and sometimes even contradictory, claims. Theories of religious pluralism are typically proposed as alternatives to so-called exclusivist theories (on which see, for example, Plantinga 1995 and 2000) which hold that the core claims of at most one religion can be true and that the claims made within other traditions are false insofar as they conflict with the true claims of the preferred religion.

Within contemporary Anglophone philosophy of religion interest in theories of religious pluralism has been fuelled by the increasingly felt need to broaden the scope of the discipline to include ideas from a wider range of religious traditions than was usually the case in the past (see Schellenberg 2008 and 2005). As we shall see below, desire to expand the scope of the discipline in this way gives rise to methodological issues which require philosophers of religion to grapple not only with religious but also with philosophical diversity.

One approach to expanding the scope of the discipline is exemplified in Keith Yandell's *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (Yandell 1999). Yandell's strategy in this book is first to provide an abstract and schematic account of four religious perspectives: that of Jainism, Theravada Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, and, what he terms, Generic Philosophical Monotheism. Yandell then extracts from these perspectives a number of fundamental ontological commitments, which are used to yield the following claims:

> If Generic Philosophical Monotheism is correct, God and persons created by God must exist.
> If Jainism is correct, persons that don't depend for their existence on anything must exist.

If Theravada Buddhism is correct, only transitory states exist.

If Advaita Vedanta Hinduism is correct,[1] only qualityless Brahman exists.

(Paraphrased from Yandell 1999, 34)

The next step in Yandell's argument is to demonstrate that if any one of these claims is true, then that would entail the falsity of all the other claims. The project of the rest of Yandell's book is, then, to analyse the relevant claims in detail with a view to establishing if any one of them can be justifiably held to be true, or, conversely, if any of them can be ruled out as false (or, ideally, as necessarily false on the grounds that the claim itself entails a logical contradiction—which, in Yandell's assessment, is the fate of the core ontological claim of Advaita Vedanta).[2]

The success of Yandell's project, and others like it, requires that at least two conditions are met. First, that the relevant claims can be formulated precisely and accurately enough to generate logical contradictions. Second, that no theory of religious pluralism can provide a coherent account of the truth of religious claims that would block the generation of the required contradictions. For example, a pluralist theory according to which it might be possible rationally to hold both that 'persons depend on God for their existence' and that 'persons are ontologically independent' would prevent Yandell's project from proceeding further. Hence, a key set of sub-arguments in Yandell's book concern the refutation of religious pluralism. Yandell seeks to demonstrate that religious pluralism—at least in the form which he considers—is not even possibly true because it entails a logical contradiction (see Yandell 1999, 67–79).

Later I consider some criticisms of religious pluralism advanced by Yandell and others. Before doing so, however, it is worth briefly considering whether the coherence and rational acceptability of some theory of religious pluralism would necessarily put a stop to multi-traditional philosophy of religion, as Yandell thinks that it would. Certainly, projects such as Yandell's would not fare well if some form of religious pluralism were widely accepted. But might there not be another direction

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[1] More exactly, what would be correct in each of these cases are the diagnoses of the human condition and the proposed cures of it proffered by each of the traditions. See Yandell 1999, 33.

[2] 'Thus to claim that Brahman, or anything else, is qualityless is to claim that it exists and to deny an entailment of that very claim. Hence Advaita Vedanta metaphysics is not even possible true.' Yandell 1999, 242.

that philosophy of religion could take if it were responsive to some form of methodological religious pluralism? I return to this question below.

Religious pluralism, in the methodological sense explained above, has played an increasingly prominent role in analytic philosophy of religion since the 1980s. Discussion of it has, however, tended to remain narrowly focused on just one form of pluralist theory, namely, on that form that has been proposed and developed by John Hick (1922–2012). Despite the fact that alternative forms of methodological religious pluralism have been advanced by a number of thinkers including Joseph Runzo (1986), Robert Cummings Neville (1991), Stephen Kaplan (1992), Kenneth Rose (1996), and Victoria Harrison (2006), many seem tacitly to assume that there is just one theory of religious pluralism; and the debate then concerns whether or not this theory is to be accepted. While the time seems long overdue for more sustained consideration of alternative theories—a point to which I return later—it is undeniable that Hick's is the most well-known and influential pluralist theory within philosophy of religion to date. Hence, any overview of religious pluralism must engage in some detail with Hick's theory and its critics.

Hickean Transcendental Pluralism

The fullest exposition of John Hick's form of pluralism is found in his *An Interpretation of Religion* (first published in 1989, second edition 2004). I will explain the argument of this book in some detail because, as mentioned above, much of the more recent work within philosophy of religion on the topic of pluralism is a response to Hick's seminal contribution in this book, and virtually all of the current discussion about the topic still takes place within the conceptual framework articulated by Hick.[3]

Before introducing his version of religious pluralism Hick provides a context for it by explaining, what he characterises as, his 'religious interpretation of religion' (Hick 2004, 1). Hick sought to develop a religious interpretation of religion that would stand as a plausible rival to the various naturalistic theories of religion that seemed to be gaining ascendancy during the second half of the twentieth century. After recounting a wealth of phenomenological data about the world's major religious traditions, he proceeds to a defence of one of his key claims: that the universe is

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[3] For a study of the development of Hick's pluralist view, see Eddy 2002.

religiously ambiguous in the sense that it permits both religious and naturalistic interpretations, and that these interpretations are both consistent with different ways of experiencing the world (see McKim 2001). As he explains, this does 'not mean that it [the universe] has no definite character but that it is capable from our present human vantage point of being thought and experienced in both religious and naturalistic ways' (Hick 2004, 73). To establish this claim Hick reviews the main arguments in favour of a religious interpretation and while he concedes that none is decisive he also judges naturalism's claim that theism is redundant to be unpersuasive, especially on the grounds that there are so many features of our religious, ethical and aesthetic experience that seem to invite a response framed in terms of a religious interpretation.

The ambiguity of the universe, Hick argues, presents each one of us with a 'fundamental option'—whether to experience it in a religious or a non-religious way. The choice that we must make, according to Hick, does not concern whether to believe in a proposition ('that God exists' for instance), but instead takes place at the level of what we might call cognitive orientation (see Hick 2004, 159). What is at stake in such a choice is whether or not we will experience the world religiously or naturalistically. Moreover, because the choice is underdetermined by the actual and possible evidence, Hick avers that both religious people and naturalists can be rational in basing their beliefs about the nature of the world on their own way of experiencing it (Hick 2004, 233). (Underlying this argument is what has been termed the Principle of Critical Trust, see Kwan 2003 and 2012.)

The argument so far explained has addressed the disagreement between naturalists and those holding a religious perspective. With the conclusion of that argument in place, Hick then argues that there is a further level of ambiguity to take into account if we are to reach a fuller understanding of our cognitive position. This next level of ambiguity faces one who opts against a naturalistic interpretation of the universe and chooses to experience and interpret it in a religious way. To such an individual a series of further options present themselves in the form of different religious traditions, each offering distinctive interpretations of the universe and different possibilities of experiencing religiously within it. Moreover, in Hick's assessment, the evidence and arguments in favour of any one of these traditions over the others do not appear decisive. Religious experience seems to be capable of supporting each of the various religious options to a roughly similar degree, as does the evidence provided by other factors such as the number and quality of the saints a

given tradition produces (see Hick 1991). The universe is then ambiguous in the sense that it can rationally support a number of quite different religious interpretations and ways of experiencing religiously.

Hick then deploys the observation that different religions make strikingly different and often contradictory claims about a wide range of gods, goddesses, and non-personal ultimates to introduce his pluralist hypothesis. At the heart of this hypothesis is his conviction that 'the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it' (Hick 2004, 235–36). Hick terms this postulated ultimate divine Reality 'the Real' and claims that it is this which is the 'ground' of all authentic religious phenomena and religious experience (Hick 2004, 236).

Thus Hick attempts to address the philosophical problems raised by the fact that religions have proposed for belief a very large number of different deities and have subscribed to irreconcilably different conceptions of ultimate reality, with the claim that behind this variety lies something even more ultimate, namely, the Real. This brings us to this nub of Hick's pluralist hypothesis, which is that

> the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place. (Hick 2004, 240).

Hick explains that these 'different perceptions and conceptions' of the Real concern the Real as it is thinkable and experiencable by beings such as ourselves. In other words, they concern the gods, goddesses and various ultimates of the religious traditions of the world. But, as we have seen, Hick postulates a further reality behind these phenomena; to distinguish this more fundamental reality from the various perceptions and conceptions of it, he calls it 'the Real *an sich*' (the Real in itself). The Real in itself, in Hick's assessment, lies permanently beyond the range of our thought and experience (Hick presents it as a 'postulate' in a broadly Kantian sense). While each of the major post-axial religious traditions provides a way of conceiving and experiencing the Real, none is able to deliver a conception or experience of the Real

an sich because it is impossible for finite and limited beings such as ourselves to experience or conceive the infinite and unlimited Real *an sich*. The conclusion Hick draws is that, as far as we can tell, each major religion is appropriately related to the Real *an sich* and is therefore capable of facilitating a salvific transformation on the part of its adherents.

Hick's distinction between the Real as it is in itself (the Real *an sich*) and the Real as it is thought of and experienced by us, as he readily acknowledges, is indebted to Kant's distinction between a noumenon (a thing as it is in itself) and a phenomenon (a thing as it appears to human consciousness) (see Hick 2004, 240–46). The most important idea that Hick takes from Kant is that 'the noumenal world exists independently of our perception of it and the phenomenal world is that same world as it appears to our human consciousness' (Hick 2004, 241). Hick deploys this idea within the context of religious epistemology (something which Kant did not venture to do), and it is this which enables him to formulate his key claim:

> [T]he noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of gods and absolutes which the phenomenology of religion reports. And these divine *personae* and metaphysical *impersonae*…are not illusory but are empirically, that is experientially, real as authentic manifestations of the Real. (Hick 2004, 242)

Addressing the question of the relation of human experience to the Real, Hick continues:

> [T]he Real is experienced by human beings, but experienced in a manner analogous to that in which, according to Kant, we experience the world: namely by informational input from external reality being interpreted in the mind in terms of its own categorical scheme and thus coming to consciousness as meaningful phenomenal experience. All that we are entitled to say about the noumenal source of this information is that it is the reality whose influence produces, in collaboration with the human mind, the phenomenal world of our experience. This takes place through certain concepts which Kant calls the categories of the understanding. (Hick 2004, 243)

Certain basic categories, then, as Hick proceeds to argue, have a vital role in the process of bringing either the world or the Real to consciousness. Hick proposes that in the latter case there are two such basic categories: first, the concept of the Real as a personal God, and second, that of the Real as a non-personal Absolute (see Hick 2004, 245). While neither of these two basic categories allows the Real to be thought of or experienced in itself, according to Hick, both nonetheless generate a multiplicity of ways of authentically experiencing and conceiving of the Real. Moreover, he claims that, '[e]ach of these two basic categories, God and the Absolute, is schematised or made concrete within actual religious experience as a range of particular gods or absolutes' (Hick 2004, 245). The particular forms these gods and absolutes take are shaped by the various local contexts provided by the diverse human cultures that have flourished in different times and places. It follows, argues Hick, that all talk about gods and other religious phenomena refers to the Real *as phenomenal*, in other words, to the Real as it is—or could be—thought of and experienced by us. About the Real as it is in itself we can say nothing concrete; although we can, Hick avers, make purely formal statements about it (Hick suggests that Anselm's formulation 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' applies to the Real in itself as it is a purely formal concept which does not entail any concrete characteristics (Hick 2004, 246)).

According to Hick, we cannot literally ascribe any characteristics or attributes, such as compassion or love, to the Real *an sich*; although we can do so with respect to the Real as it is thought of and experienced by us as the various religious phenomena of the world. For instance, we could literally assert that the God of Abraham was a just God but we could not literally assert this of the Real in itself. It follows that if we are to say anything about the Real *an sich*, we must do so by deploying language mythologically. Mythical statements are principally evocative, in Hick's view. A myth succeeds if it 'evokes an appropriate dispositional attitude to its subject-matter' (Hick 2004, 248). A true myth, in Hick's understanding, is not a literally true statement but nonetheless 'rightly relates us to a reality about which we cannot speak in non-mythological terms' and evokes 'in us attitudes and modes of behaviour which are appropriate to our situation in relation to the Real' (Hick 2004, 248). Hick further explains:

According to the pluralistic hypothesis we can make true and false literal and analogical statements about our own image of the Ultimate, truth or falsity here being determined internally by the norms of our tradition. But statements about the Real in itself have mythological, not literal, value. A statement about X is mythologically true if it is not literally true but nevertheless tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to X. Mythological truth is thus a kind of practical or pragmatic as distinguished from theoretical truth. (Hick 2004, xxxiv)

Hick employs this distinction between practical and theoretical truth to support his claim that certain statements can be literally true of images of the divine (what he calls the divine *personae* and metaphysical *impersonae* of the Real), while being non-literally but mythologically true of the Real in itself. According to Hick, the fact that religions hold different beliefs does not entail, as it does for an exclusivist, that at most only one of them can be substantially correct. This is because, at the literal level different religions describe different phenomena and hence do not contradict one another, and at the mythological level there is no contradiction for, not being literally true or false, myths are just not the sort of things that can be in contradiction.

The notion of the Real *an sich* is clearly of pivotal importance to Hickean pluralism. Not surprisingly, criticism of Hick's theory has tended to target precisely this notion, as we shall now see.

Key Criticisms of Hickean Pluralism

Critics have focused on Hick's claim that our statements cannot refer to the Real *an sich* literally and on his view that any language which we employ to talk about the Real *an sich* can only be metaphorically true if it is true at all (for instance, Byrne 1982 and Netland 1991). As we have seen, Hick endorses what we might call a strong ineffability claim; holding the Real *an sich* to be in principle beyond description in either positive or negative terms. Some of Hick's critics (for example, Rowe 1999, Yandell 1999 and Plantinga 2000) have argued that in cases in which mutually contradictory qualities are at stake, such as X and not-X, if we deny that the Real *an sich* possesses X we are logically committed to asserting that 'not-X' applies to it literally. Plantinga illustrates this criticism with the following example:

If Hick means that none of our terms applies literally to the Real, then it isn't possible to make sense of what he says. I take it that the term 'tricycle' does not apply to the Real; the Real is not a tricycle. But if the Real is not a tricycle, then, 'is not a tricycle' applies literally to it; it is a nontricycle. It could hardly be neither a tricycle nor a nontricycle, nor do I think that Hick would want to suggest that it could. (Plantinga 2000, 45)

Hick's response to such critics is to assert that he does indeed wish to deny that concepts such as tricycle either apply or fail to apply to the Real, this is a simple consequence of his claim that no statements apply literally to the Real *an sich*. He claims that the Real *an sich* is beyond such concepts because it is just not the kind of thing to which such concepts could either apply or fail to apply. Is a molecule stupid or clever, or a stone virtuous or wicked, asks Hick rhetorically. The molecule is surely not stupid, but by failing to be stupid it is not thereby clever, likewise, a lack of virtue does not require that we call a stone wicked. And so it is with the Real *an sich*; certain concepts, indeed, most concepts, do not apply (see Hick 2004, xix–xxii).

Yet Hick does concede that while 'substantial' attributions—that is, those that would give us descriptive information—do not apply literally to the Real *an sich*, purely 'formal' attributions are permissible. One might say of the Real *an sich*, then, that it is 'able to be referred to' or that it is 'that than which nothing greater can be thought'. However, it is vital to Hick's theory that no such formal attributions provide any descriptive content. If Hick were to allow any descriptive content to attributions pertaining to the Real *an sich*, it would follow that some religious conceptions reflected that content more accurately than others. This would entail that some religious conceptions were superior to others, and the way would be open for ranking religions hierarchically, with pride of place accorded to whichever was deemed to possess the most accurate conception of the Real *an sich*. If this were possible, religious pluralism would be on the road to redundancy as the case would be prepared for preferring whichever religion was found to have the most accurate conception of the Real *an sich*.

Hick's critics do not let the matter rest here though. Yandell argues that Hick's refusal to allow that any statements apply to the Real which attribute substantial properties to it, combined with the uninformative nature of those purely formal

concepts which can be applied to it, renders the Real *an sich* unable to play the explanatory role in Hick's pluralist hypothesis that Hick requires it to perform. After all, in elaborating his theory, Hick does attribute substantial properties to the Real *an sich* (such as being the transcendent source and cause of religious experience) that, according to his own lights, cannot apply.

The refusal to admit that any substantial non-formal properties can be correctly ascribed to the Real *an sich* exposes Hickean pluralism to another serious objection. Plantinga poses the problem in the following way: 'If the Real has no positive properties of which we have a grasp, how could we possibly know or have grounds for believing that some ways of behaving with respect to it are more appropriate than others?' (Plantinga 2000, 57, and see Yandell 1999, 78–79). Hick replies to this criticism by reminding his critics that his is a '*religious* interpretation of religion', and as such it is developed from within the religious standpoint that 'there is a transcendent reality of limitless importance to us' (Hick 2004, xxv). Applying the Principle of Critical Trust to all religious experience (according to which religious experience 'is to be trusted except when we have a reason to distrust it' (Hick 2004 xxv–xxvi)), Hick avers that this reality is disclosed through the religious experiences available within the various religions of the world. Moreover, the authenticity of such religious experiences is judged through its visible effects on human lives, specifically in terms of observable moral and spiritual development. And, of course, the notions of moral and spiritual development are cashed out in terms of presupposed religious appraisals of the importance of the Real within human life.

As explained above, Hick's pluralist theory is premised upon a *religious* explanation of the diversity of religions and of the diverse forms of religious experience which these religions support. Consequently, Hick's theory will have greatest appeal to those who are already of a religious bent of mind and who are seeking to reconcile the particularity of their own faith-tradition with respect for the traditions of others. The religiousness of Hick's theory is surely what has made it so appealing to religious practitioners, especially those directly involved in inter-religious dialogue, but it simultaneously exposes the theory to the criticism of philosophers who are trained to regard religious convictions not as premises within theories but as standing in need of independent support.

Alternative Forms of Pluralist Theory

We have seen that the most well-known and influential pluralist theory—Hickean pluralism—is explicitly developed and presented as a *religious* theory, and we have observed that this makes the theory especially vulnerable to criticism. In this section we consider the possibility of developing alternative forms of methodological pluralism that would be neutral with respect to the choice between a religious and a naturalistic interpretation of religion. Consider again what gives rise to the need for a theory of religious pluralism. Disagreements about religious belief, both among religious people of the same or different affiliations and between religious believers and non-believers, are ongoing and often intractable. The scope of such disagreements between people who are roughly epistemic peers is what makes a pluralist account of religious diversity seem desirable. The core of a viable theory of pluralism in the religious domain must be an account of what it means to characterize religious statements as true or false, or as capable of being true or false. The details of such an account will be what distinguish pluralist theories from exclusivist accounts of religious belief (although see D'Costa 1996). According to exclusivist accounts—and following one of the core axioms of classical logic—in cases where claims conflict at most one of the claims can be true. Truth, on the exclusivist view, is a property that can be possessed by at most one claim from a set of conflicting ones. If one holds such a view, then a theory of methodological pluralism would be redundant as there would be nothing for it to explain (although one may still choose to adopt attitudinal pluralism).

Furthermore, a theory of methodological pluralism is only required if one holds that religious claims can be true or false. If religious claims are thought to be non-cognitive, then the questions methodological pluralism seeks to answer do not arise. One might, therefore, regard methodological pluralism as occupying the conceptual space left between an exclusivist account of religious truth and non-cognitivist or naturalistic accounts according to which religious claims are either all false or are not capable of being either true or false. Clearly, this conceptual space is large and hence is able to accommodate a number of different forms of pluralist theory. Two basic types of methodological pluralism stand out, these can be characterised as reductive pluralisms and non-reductive pluralisms.

Reductive pluralisms hold that all major religions are somehow related to, or derived from, one thing. Religions are thought to be grounded in a more fundamental

reality that transcends them all. John Hick's pluralist theory is of this type, as it holds that all authentic religions are related to the Real. But because, as discussed above, Hick further claimed that there is no access to this one fundamental reality except by way of the particular religious traditions, his pluralist theory can be more precisely described as a non-eliminativist reductionist form of pluralism. Clearly, not all forms of reductive pluralism need be non-eliminativist. An example of a form of methodological pluralism which is both reductionist and eliminativist has been proposed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. He holds that religions are representations of a single ideal divine form of religion and that they all contain distortions, some more than others (Nasr 1991). In principle, distortions can all be eliminated leaving only one true religion which will be a perfect representation of the ideal. Interestingly, both Nasr's form of pluralism and Hick's are religious theories, insofar as each identifies in religious terms the fundamental reality on which all particular expressions of religion are based.

Non-reductive pluralisms, on the other hand, do not claim that all particular religions are related to, or derived from, some single transcendent entity. Religions are therefore to be understood without reference to a supposed more fundamental reality which transcends them. There are a number of ways in which the details of non-reductive pluralism can be spelt out. For instance, according to one version—known as internalist pluralism—religions might be represented as different and self-contained conceptual schemata, the claims within which being only evaluable internally to those schemata. Given the lack of a common transcendent object to which these schemata are somehow all related, convergence between them is deemed to be highly unlikely. Hence, eliminativism is avoided.

The great advantage of non-reductive and non-eliminativist forms of methodological pluralism over reductive forms of pluralism is that they are non-religious theories which do not depend for their cogency on positing the existence of a transcendent entity which is characterised in religious terms. Moreover, they are equally unaligned to non-cognitivist or naturalistic perspectives according to which all religious claims are false (or at least deemed to be not the sort of claims which could be true or false). In fact, the form of non-reductionist methodological pluralism briefly alluded to above, namely internalist pluralism, leaves it open whether or not any particular claim made within some religious conceptual scheme is true or false. It

merely stipulates the methodological framework within which religious claims can be investigated and assessed for truth.

Internalist pluralism is a form of methodological pluralism that is concerned with the nature of truth-claims within different religious conceptual schemata (see Harrison 2006, 2008 and 2011). It is based on Hilary Putnam's theory of internal realism, and in particular on his characterisation of the relationship between conceptual schemata, ontology, justification and truth (see, especially, Putnam 1981). Essentially, according to internalist pluralism, all substantial religious claims are made within some conceptual scheme or another and can only be properly understood and assessed within the context of the appropriate conceptual scheme. Hence, all such claims will be found to be true or false only within the relevant conceptual scheme. Consider, for example, the question 'did the Buddha attained nirvana?'. Internalist pluralism holds that this question can only be sensibly raised within a Buddhist conceptual scheme. If we want to know what 'nirvana' refers to we must look to the conceptual scheme within which nirvana has a place. It would make no sense to ask whether the Buddha attained nirvana within the framework of a conceptual scheme, such as a Christian one, within which the concept of nirvana did not occur. An internalist pluralist would hold that the meaning of the term 'nirvana' is only accessible within the appropriate conceptual scheme, thus to make judgements about the truth or falsity of claims which include this concept is only possible within that conceptual scheme. Let us say that within a Buddhist conceptual scheme it turned out to be true that the Buddha attained nirvana, what would that imply about the truth or falsity of the claim 'the Buddha attained nirvana' within the framework of a Christian conceptual scheme? The internalist pluralist would claim that it implies nothing. From the truth of a claim within one conceptual scheme one cannot 'read off' its truth within any other scheme. Indeed, this claim may be neither true nor false within a Christian conceptual scheme because nirvana is not recognised as a possible object within a Christian ontology (see Harrison 2008).

There are, of course, problems which internalist pluralism must address, many concerning the cogency of internal realism, these cannot be dealt with here (but see Harrison 2008). The theory has been briefly introduced here merely to illustrate the potential of non-reductive and non-eliminativist forms of methodological pluralism to remain genuinely neutral with respect to different religious conceptions, and between religious and naturalistic interpretations of religion, and thereby to provide a

framework within which claims can be investigated for truth without determining in advance which of them, if any, are thought to be true. The ability of non-reductive non-eliminativist forms of methodological pluralism to deliver such a framework recommends them as potentially capable of supporting the practice of genuinely tradition-neutral philosophy of religion. However, if philosophy of religion is to be developed further in this direction it must face additional complexities arising from engagement with the various philosophical systems that have developed within and alongside non-western religious traditions, some of which, as we shall now see, already include pluralist theories at their core.

Non-Western Pluralisms

Discussions of religious pluralism within the philosophy of religion often overlook pluralist theories that have been developed within non-western religious philosophies. John Hick noted the similarity of his pluralist theory to the much early theory elaborated by the architect of Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, Śaṇkara (788–820? CE). Indeed, the similarity between these theories in both their metaphysics and their epistemology is so striking that one might mount a modern philosophical defence of Śaṇkara's theory by deploying Hick's arguments. Conversely, the arguments targeted against Hick's account of the Real *an sich* apply with equal force to Śaṇkara's account of Nirguṇa Brahman (that is, Brahman without qualities). This is especially problematic given Hick's claim to have proposed a pluralist theory that does not favour any one religious tradition. The similarities between Hick's theory and Śaṇkara's also undermine Hick's repeated assertion that he is not advocating his pluralist theory as an alternative religious tradition. Despite the seriousness of these problems, the issues they raise have not received adequate attention within the literature.

A further striking gap in the literature on pluralism within philosophy of religion concerns the pluralist theory that lies at the heart of Jain philosophy. In response to persistent disagreement about religious and philosophical claims on the Indian subcontinent in the early centuries of the Common Era, Jain logicians devised a sophisticated theory to explain why it was the case that equally rational people supported apparently conflicting views. The explanation that they proposed to account

for this troubling fact was premised upon their claim that reality is many-sided (*anekānta*) and that people adopt different perspectives (*nayas*) which allow them to understand selective aspects of reality. They held that adopting a perspective inevitably precludes one from attaining a comprehensive understanding of anything because any one perspective is only capable of giving partial knowledge of what is the case. This conviction led Jains to claim that any single assertion about a thing will be incapable of expressing the whole nature of that thing. They concluded from this that our assertions cannot be unconditionally true, but only true in a certain respect.

In short, the Jains proposed a pluralist theory according to which one could assert such claims as 'X has property y' and 'X does not have property y' without contradicting oneself. We routinely experience instances of objects both possessing and not possessing a particular property and, as in such cases we do not hold that our experience is contradictory, we should not, they argued, hold that the assertions we form on the basis of our experience are contradictory. The stock example they used to illustrate this idea was a cloth with two colours, blue and grey. What colour is such a cloth? One answer (a Buddhist one) would be that the cloth has no colour at all and only the individual threads have colour—some being blue and others being grey. Another answer would be that the cloth has a single new colour which is the product of a mixture of the colours of its parts. Both of these views are extremes, according to the Jains, and both, they held, are contrary to common sense. The Jain position is that the cloth is both blue and not blue, and both grey and not grey. As we have seen, they claim that properties such as 'blue' and 'not blue' are not properly regarded as contradictory because we regularly encounter them in our experience and our experience is not contradictory. Observations such as this led them to propose a method for the analysis of assertions which, they held, was capable of explaining how we can say, for example, both that 'the cloth is blue' and that 'the cloth is not blue' without actually contradicting ourselves—despite the surface grammar of these utterances.

Jain logicians rejected the principle—which was widely accepted in their own day, as it is in ours—that assertion and denial are mutually exclusive alternatives. They rejected this principle on the grounds that assertions have, what they called, 'hidden parameters' that are not made explicit in our ordinary ways of using language. In their view, assertion does not rule out denial because of the hidden parameters governing the scope of particular assertions and denials. With respect to one set of

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parameters, one might be able correctly to assert 'X has property y', while, with respect to another set, one might be able correctly to assert 'X does not have property y'. They attempt to explain this further by means of their theory of seven modes (*saptabhaṅgī*), according to which any statement can be asserted in seven possible ways (see Ganeri 2001 and, for an introductory account, Harrison 2012, 42–47).

With their theory of seven modes and their account of the limited nature of perspectives, the Jains proposed a novel framework within which to think about the rival commitments of various religious and philosophical schools. Despite the sophistication of this account there has been little discussion of it within the philosophy of religion. The current neglect of the Jain form of pluralism is perhaps symptomatic of how much further philosophy of religion needs to go in order to become a discipline in which the ideas and perspectives of all (or all major) religious traditions are given due weight. It also points to the deeper issues concerning philosophical methodology that lurk not far beneath apparently straightforward discussions of religious pluralism.

Conclusion

One urgent task now facing philosophers of religion is to continue the process, already well underway, of integrating the philosophical analysis of the claims of non-western religious traditions into a discipline whose curriculum has until fairly recently been dominated by a focus on western religious ideas. It seems likely that this process would be facilitated by attention to, and further development of, different forms of methodological pluralism, especially non-reductive and non-eliminativist versions. While the contribution that John Hick's form of pluralist theory has made to philosophy of religion should not be underestimated, it is time to take the discussion and critical scrutiny of methodological pluralism beyond the framework for debate established by Hick.

While much philosophy of religion now routinely takes into account a variety of religious perspectives, to date there has been insufficient attention devoted to developing a methodology that could underwrite this new approach. Remedying this may well be the most urgent conceptual issue currently facing the subject. Tackling this issue requires that philosophers of religion take into account that different

religious traditions have been associated with a number of diverse philosophical traditions (consider the philosophical traditions of India, for example). Despite the fact that philosophers of religion are increasingly expected to be sensitive to this higher-level philosophical diversity, so far there has been little acknowledgement of the depth of the problems that need to be faced once we take seriously the idea that we might have diversity all the way down, even down to our philosophical traditions and the logical systems which underlie them (see Priest 2006). This suggests that theories of religious pluralism need to develop alongside theories of more general philosophical, and logical, pluralism if they are to be genuinely responsive to diversity on the different levels at which it is found in the various religious and philosophical traditions of the world.

As I have argued above, once the diversity of the world's religious traditions becomes more fully integrated into philosophy of religion, the deeper issues raised by philosophical diversity will also have to be dealt with. A pluralist theory that is adequate to the task will need to be capable of making sense of the practice of philosophy of religion when it cuts across religious and philosophical traditions. A Hickean approach might be adopted—one which seeks to relate all the philosophical traditions to a single 'transcendental' one (the strategy of reduction without elimination). Or an alternative may be sought—such as a form of internalist pluralism—which resists both reduction to one philosophical or religious system and the elimination of diversity.

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