

Religious Pluralism and Islam

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The subject of the relationship between the religions is extremely important, even more so today than in the past. For centuries almost every war between the nations has involved religion, not as its primary cause, but as a validating and intensifying factor. However I am going to treat religious diversity now as a topic in the philosophy of religion, although in the course of doing so it will emerge that some conceptions of this relationship are much more easily exploited to justify and encourage war and exploitation than others.

Why is this a philosophical problem? Each religion is accustomed to think of itself as either the one and only true faith, or at least the truest and best. Must not the situation, then, simply be that one of them is right and the rest wrong, either absolutely or only relatively wrong?

But here is a consideration which makes this view of the situation problematic. In the vast majority of cases throughout the world, probably 98% or so, the religion to which a person adheres (and also against which some rebel) depends on where they were born. Someone born into a Muslim family in a Muslim country, or indeed a Muslim family in a non-Muslim country, is very likely to become a Muslim. Someone born into a Christian family is equally likely to become a Christian. And the same is true of Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Taoists. It is very unlikely that someone born into a Buddhist family in Tibet will grow up as a Christian or a Muslim; very unlikely that someone born into a Muslim family in Iran or in Pakistan will grow up as a Christian or a Buddhist; and so on round the world. The historical fact is that we

inherit, and always have inherited, our religion together with our language and our culture. And the religion which has formed us from childhood naturally seems to us to be obviously true; it fits us and we fit it as usually none other can. It is true that there are individual conversions from one faith to another, but these are statistically insignificant in comparison with the massive transmission of faith from generation to generation within the same tradition.

How then are we to understand this global situation in which, due to the accident of birth, we all start from within what we have traditionally regarded as the one true faith? To enquire into the relationship between the religions is clearly to ask a difficult but unavoidable question.

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Several factors make the question especially urgent today. One is that we now have available to us a much greater knowledge about the other world religions than was readily available even a generation ago. Another is that the different faiths are no longer concentrated almost exclusively within different nations which are wholly of that faith. There are, for example, now millions of Muslims living in western Europe, some two million in my own country, Britain. Indeed in the city of Birmingham, where I live, there are well over a hundred mosques – not all of them purpose-built with traditional Islamic architecture, although there is a growing number of these, but also a number houses converted to local prayer houses. The city also includes a substantial number of Sikhs and Hindus, and smaller numbers of Jews and Buddhists and Bahai'is, as well as many members of all the many different branches of Christianity, all amidst a large secular or nominally or post-Christian population. We all live together in the same city, and on the whole without friction and indeed often with very positive relationships. Now the time has come to consider

the theological implications of this. We all, within each faith, need our theologians and philosophers to give thought to the overall question of how to understand the fact of religious diversity. Should we see it as something to be regretted, or as something divinely ordained?

A complicating factor which is not often noticed is that the individuals and communities to which the biblical and quran'ic revelations came many centuries ago, to restrict our attention to these two, had a very limited awareness of the size of the earth and of its population and of the variety of peoples and cultures and faiths that it contains. Their horizon extended no further than the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean world. As they expanded, of course, India and China, and later Russia and later again the Americas came within the scope of their awareness. But the original message was received and expressed in terms of the language and culture of a relatively small part of the world. But today we have to think globally, and to consider the relationship of the entire human race to the divine source of revelation.

The literature on this subject has been growing rapidly during the last twenty or so years and is now vast, with hundreds of new books and articles being published every year. It is still mostly in English, though with an increasing amount in German, and also with a growing amount in the languages of several Muslim countries, including Iran and Turkey.

It has become widely accepted that there are three possible schools of thought, which have come to be called exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Let us look at exclusivism first.

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This is most easily described in terms of any one particular religion rather than in general terms. Since I know more about Christianity, and the

Christian literature on this subject, than any other, I shall be more confident in describing it as a Christian position. But you readily can translate it into terms of Islam, or indeed of any other religion.

As a Christian position, exclusivism is the belief that Christianity is the one and only true faith and that salvation, which Christian exclusivists understand as entry into heaven, or paradise, is confined to Christians. For many centuries this was taken for granted by most Christians and was enshrined in such official declarations as that of the Council of Florence (1438-45 CE) that ‘no one remaining outside the Catholic church, not just pagans, but also Jews or heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to the “everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels,” unless before the end of life they are joined to the church’. At that time Muslims were classified by the church as heretics, and came under that heading in this condemnation. But as early as the mid-nineteenth century the Catholic church – which constitute the largest part of Christianity – was beginning to qualify this. The Catholic church can never bring itself to say directly that any of its earlier official pronouncements were wrong, but it does sometimes leave them behind in the past and proceed now to say something different. But it was only at the second Vatican Council in the 1960’s that it officially recognised that salvation can occur within other religions. However this recognition is qualified in a way that we shall come to when we turn to inclusivism. Unqualified exclusivism is still strongly maintained by a small minority of fundamentalist Catholics, but much more widely by many Protestant (i.e. non-Catholic) fundamentalist Christians.

The leading philosophical defender of Christian exclusivism is Alvin Plantinga of Notre Dame University. He is a high-powered logician and a leading apologist for a very conservative form of Christianity, his own background being in Dutch Calvinism. The argument of his article “Pluralism: A Defence of Exclusivism” is basically simple and straightforward, namely that anyone who is firmly convinced that they know the final truth is fully entitled dogmatically to affirm this and to affirm that all beliefs inconsistent with it are therefore mistaken. It is not necessary for the exclusivist to know anything about other religions, beyond the fact that they are different from Christianity and have different beliefs, because he or she knows a priori that they are mistaken. Plantinga argues that, in so doing, exclusivists are not being arrogant or imperialistic, and are not offending against any sound epistemological principles. Knowing Alvin, I know that he is not personally arrogant, and nor does any exclusivist *have* to be arrogant and imperialistic about it, even though some are. But, for me, that is not the issue. Nor is it more than a preliminary issue that a claim that your own group alone knows the final truth is not epistemically out of order. For this is a very low threshold for any belief-system to have to cross. It justifies equally the claim, for example, that the South Korean evangelist Sun Yung Moon is the final prophet and that his followers alone know the final truth; or the claim of Seventh Day Adventists within Christianity, or of Ahmadiyya Muslims within Islam, that it is they who alone know the truth. The Plantinga defence justifies equally the claim of any group anywhere, large or small, that it alone possesses the absolute truth. And yet logical and epistemological permissibility seems to be the only issue that concerns Plantinga in his defence of exclusivism. He has tried in his more recent book *Warranted Christian Belief* to offer a broader apologetic for Christianity. But epistemic

warrant or permissibility is much too narrow a concern. For me, what is at stake is whether it is realistic today to ignore the global context in which we live, and the fact that other religions, and I am thinking now particularly of Islam, turn human beings away from selfish self-concern to serve God, just as much as Christianity does. Plantinga does not take account of this. The global particularities and complexities of real life have no place in his thinking. Further, his approach is very cerebral, focussed entirely on propositional beliefs, and he does not, in his defence of exclusivism, discuss the question of salvation, or of the moral and spiritual fruits of faith outside Christianity. Probably, if asked about the salvation of the non-Christian majority of the human race, he would say that this is something that only God knows. But if only God knows it, how can Plantinga, or any other exclusivist, know that his own group alone has the final and saving truth?

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I don't know to what extent there are Muslim exclusivists, believing that only Muslims, or perhaps only those of the three religions of the Book, can enter Paradise. I know that there are some, because I have myself once been told very firmly by a Muslim that I will go to hell if I do not convert to his particular minority form of Islam. And in so far as there are Muslim exclusivists, my criticism of it applies equally to them also.

But the basic criticism of both Christian and Muslim exclusivism is that it denies by implication that God, the sole creator of the world and of all humanity, is loving, gracious and merciful, and that His love and mercy extend to all humankind. If God is the creator of the entire human race, is it credible that God would set up a system by which hundreds of millions of men, women and children, the majority of the human race, are destined through no fault of

their own to eternal torment in hell? I say ‘through no fault of their own’ because it cannot be anyone’s fault that they were born where they were instead of within what exclusivism regards as the one limited area of salvation.

One exclusivist Christian philosopher, William Lane Craig, has tried to meet this difficulty by appealing to the idea of ‘middle knowledge’, the idea that God knows what every human being *would* do in all conceivable circumstances. He then claims that God knows of all those who have not had the Christian Gospel presented to them that, if it were presented to them, they would reject it. It is therefore not unjust that they, constituting the majority of humanity, should be condemned. But this is manifestly an a priori dogma, condemning hundreds of millions of people without any knowledge of them; and even many other very conservative Christian philosophers have found it repugnant. For on any reasonable view exclusivism, practiced within any religion, is incompatible with the existence of a God whose grace and mercy extends to the entire human race.

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I turn next to inclusivism. In its Christian form this is the belief that, on the one hand, salvation for anyone depends solely on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, but on the other hand that this salvation is available not only to Christians but in principle to all human beings. Thus non-Christians can be included within the sphere of Christian salvation - hence the term ‘inclusivism’. In the words of a notable Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, they can, even without their knowledge, be ‘anonymous Christians’. That phrase has been offensive to many non-Christians, who ask whether Christians would like to be classified as anonymous Muslims, or anonymous Hindus? But without the use of that particular phrase, inclusivism is today the most widely held position

among Christian theologians and church leaders. It has for them the advantage that on the one hand it maintains the unique centrality and normativeness of the Christian gospel, whilst on the other hand it does not entail the unacceptable conclusion that all non-Christians go to hell.

But it does nevertheless have what are to some of us unacceptable implications. To put it graphically, consider the analogy of the solar system, with God as the sun at the centre and the religions as the planets circling around that centre. Inclusivism then holds that the life-giving warmth and light of the sun falls directly only on our earth, the Christian church, and is then reflected off it in lesser degrees to the other planets, the other religions. Or if you prefer an economic analogy, the wealth of divine grace falls directly upon the church and then trickles down in diluted forms to the people of the other faiths below. And the serious question that we have to ask is whether this is an honestly realistic account of the human situation as we observe it on the ground.

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Starting again, then, and restricting attention for the moment to Christianity and Islam, both affirm the reality of God, the gracious and merciful nature of God, the justice of God, the unity of humankind as created by God, the divine command that we should deal honestly and kindly with one another, and the fact of a life to come. We both affirm a divine reality transcending the material world.

Let me stay for a moment with this last point. Philosophically, it means that we reject the non-realist forms of religion according to which God is not a reality independently of ourselves but only an idea or an ideal in our minds.

This was powerfully initiated in the nineteenth century by Ludwig Feuerbach

and is advocated today by such writers as my personal friend, but philosophical foe, Don Cupitt. On the one hand, unless we believe in the validity of any of the philosophical proofs of the existence of God, which I do not, there is no proof that non-realism in religion is wrong. Nor of course is there any proof that it is right. The real issue is epistemological, between the three options of naïve realism, critical realism, and non- or anti-realism. Critical realism, developed by American philosophers in the last century in relation to sense perception, is the view that there is an existing reality beyond our own minds, but that we can only be aware of it in the forms made possible by our own cognitive capacities and conceptual repertoire. To this we have to add the principle of critical trust, the principle that it is rational to trust our experience, except when we have good reason not to. I hold that this principle properly applies to religious experience also. For it is a principle about apparently cognitive experience as such. This means that it is fully rational to trust our human religious experience of the divine except when we have good reason not to; but that the divine reality is necessarily known to us in the forms made possible by our own conceptual resources and spiritual practices. This stands between the naïve realism whose religious form is fundamentalism, and the non or anti-realism which denies any divine reality transcending (though also immanent within) the material universe. This is a subject deserving of a much fuller treatment than is possible here, and I have in fact discussed it at length elsewhere, particularly in *An Interpretation of Religion* – of which, incidentally, a new edition including a response to critics, has recently been published. Let me add that Don Cupitt's more recent work, expressing a strong post-modernist philosophy, is to me equally unacceptable. He proclaims that there is no such thing as truth. Truth is something that we

each make up for ourselves all the time. But he proclaims this as the fundamental *truth* which he wants us all to accept! In other words, he does not apply his philosophy to itself. This is the same flaw that undermined logical positivism. There is thus, as it seems to me, a fundamental incoherence in Cupitts' strongly post-modernist conviction. In going beyond this to a *post-post-modernist* position we find that we come back full circle to the principle by which we live all the time in daily life – when something seems to be there we take it that it is there, unless we have some reason to doubt it as illusion or delusion.

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Returning now to history, taken as huge communities of many millions of men and women, neither Christians nor Muslims live up to the divine will as we know it. We all fall short and are in need of God's mercy. But do the people of one faith, taken as a whole, behave either better or worse than the people of the other? Or are virtues and vices, saints and sinners, to be found, so far as we can tell, equally within both? I think the latter. And what has made me, as a Christian, come to reject the assumption of the unique superiority of my own Christian faith is that these observable fruits are not specially concentrated in the Christian church but, on the contrary, are spread more or less evenly around the world among its different cultures and religions. Obviously this can be argued. I would only say that the onus of proof, or of argument, is upon anyone who claims that the members of his or her religion are in general better human beings, morally and spiritually, than the rest of the human race. But if so, inclusivism, whether Christian or Muslim or any other, is not realistic.

Is there an Islamic form of inclusivism? I suppose that the concept of the People of the Book could be regarded as a limited inclusivism – with the full and final truth being in Islam but with Jews and Christians nevertheless coming close to it, in distinction from the eastern religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism. But I would invite you to ask whether the moral and spiritual fruits of religion in human life are manifestly better among the People of the Book than among Buddhists, Hindus and the others? I question whether they are. It is very difficult for Muslims, Christians, and Jews to take full and well-informed account of the eastern religions, but I would like to leave the issue with you as one which has one day to be faced. That day may not be yet, but it must come sooner or later.

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I now turn to the third option, religious pluralism. In its broadest terms, this is the belief that no one religion has a monopoly of the truth or of the life that leads to salvation. Or in the more poetic words of the great Sufi, Rumi, speaking of the religions of the world, ‘The lamps are different but the Light is the same; it comes from beyond’ (*Rumi: Poet and Mystic*, trans. R.A. Nicholson, London and Boston: Unwin, p. 166).

Let us at this point ask what we mean by salvation. By salvation, as a generic concept, I mean a process of human transformation in this life from natural self-centeredness to a new orientation centred in the transcendent divine reality, God, and leading to its fulfilment beyond this life. And I hold that so far as we can tell, this salvific process is taking place and also failing to take place, to an equal extent within all the great world religions. A pluralist theology of religions is an attempt to make sense of this situation.

It is developed in a variety of ways by different thinkers. But there are two main approaches, which are not however mutually exclusive.

One is to start from within one's own faith and work outwards, so to speak, by exploring its resources for an acceptance of the salvific parity of the other world faiths - the acceptance of them, in other words, as equally authentic paths to salvation. For each tradition does in fact have within it strands of thought which can be developed to authorise the pluralist point of view. There is no time to point to these within each of the world faiths. But any reader of the Qur'an is familiar with such verses as: 'If God had pleased He would surely have made you one people (professing one faith). But He wished to try and test you by that which He gave you. So try to excel in good deeds. To Him you will all return in the end, when He will tell you of what you were at variance' (5: 48, Ahmed Ali translation), and the many verses which endorse without distinction the long succession of prophets through the ages. But the development of each faith's resources for a wider understanding can only be done within that faith in its own terms and by its own adherents. And it needs to be done on an ever increasing scale.

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The other approach, which has been my own concern as a philosopher of religion, has been to try to understand how it can be that the different religions, with all their manifest differences and undeniable incompatibilities of belief, can be on an equal level as different complexes of belief and practice within which their adherents can find salvation.

So let me very briefly outline my own suggestion. I take my clue from something that is affirmed within all the great traditions. This is that the ultimate

reality is in itself beyond the scope of human description and understanding. As the great Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas said, God ‘surpasses every form that our intellect reaches’ (*Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 14: 3). God in God’s ultimate eternal self-existent being is ineffable, or as I would rather say, transcategorical, beyond the scope of our human conceptual systems. And so we have a distinction between God in God’s infinite self-existent being and God as humanly knowable. We find this in some of the great Christian mystics, such as Meister Eckhart, who distinguished between the Godhead, which is the ultimate ineffable reality, and the known God of the scriptures and of church doctrine and worship, conceived and understood in our limited human terms. We find parallel distinctions within the other great traditions. The Jewish thinker Maimonides expressed it as a distinction between the essence and the manifestation of God. There are also well known Hindu and Buddhist versions of the distinction, although there is no time to go into them now.

In the case of Islam, so far as my knowledge goes, the distinction occurs mainly within the mystical strand. The ultimate ineffability of God is declared by a number of writers. For example, Kwaja Abdullah Ansari says, in prayer to God, ‘You are far from what we imagine you to be’, and ‘The mystery of your reality is not revealed to anyone’. (*Intimate Conversations*, trans. W. Thackston, New York: Paulist Press, London: SPCK, pp. 183 and 203). Developing the implications of this, Ibn al-’Arabi distinguishes (like Maimonides) between the divine essence, which is ineffable, and God as humanly known. In *The Bezels of Wisdom* he says, ‘The Essence, as being beyond all these relationships, is not a divinity . . . it is we who make Him a divinity by being that through which He knows himself as Divine. Thus he is not known [as Allah] until we are known’ (*The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin, New York: Paulist Press and

London: SPCK, p. 92). Again, he says, ‘In general, most men have, perforce, an individual concept of their Lord, which they ascribe to Him and in which they seek Him. So long as the Reality is presented to them according to it they recognize Him and affirm him, whereas if presented in another form, they deny Him, flee from Him and treat Him improperly, while at the same time imagining they are acting toward Him fittingly. One who believes [in the ordinary way] believes only in the deity he has created for himself, since a deity in “belief” is a [mental] construction’ (Ibid., p. 137).

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So we have a distinction between the Ultimate as it is in itself and that same ultimate reality as it impinges upon us and is conceived by our little human minds. Our awareness of the Ultimate is thus a mediated awareness, receiving its form, and indeed its plurality of forms, from the human contribution to our awareness of it. The basic critical realist principle, that in our awareness of anything the very activity of cognition itself affects the form in which we are conscious of it, is well established today in epistemology, in cognitive psychology, and in the sociology of knowledge. But it was well stated centuries ago by Thomas Aquinas in his dictum that ‘Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower’ (*Summa Theologica*, II/II, Q. 1, art 2). In ordinary sense perception the mode of the human knower is much the same throughout the world. But in religious awareness the mode of the knower differs significantly among the different religious traditions, which have been formed and developed within different historical and cultural situations. So my hypothesis is that the world religions are oriented towards the same Ultimate Reality, which is however manifested within their different thought-worlds and

forms of experience in different ways. This is the model that seems to me best to make sense of the total situation.

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Religious pluralism is emphatically not a form of relativism. That would be a fundamental misunderstanding of the critical realist principle, which requires criteria for distinguishing between perception and delusion. In contrast to this, for relativism anything goes. The religions themselves include essentially the same criteria, which are ethical, distinguishing between, for example, Islam and Christianity, on the one hand, and such movements as, for example, the Aum Shinrikyo sect which put sarin gas in the Tokyo underground system in 1995, or the Order of the Solar Temple in Canada in 1997, and many others, as well of course as the dark places and evil moments within the history of the world religions themselves.

One further point. It is sometimes said that religious pluralism is a product of post-Enlightenment western liberalism. But this is a manifest error, since the basic pluralist idea predates the 18th century European Enlightenment by many centuries. It was taught by such thinkers as Rumi and al-Arabi in the 13th century, and Kabir, Nanak, and many others in 15th century India. Indeed it occurs in the edicts of the Buddhist emperor Asoka in the 2nd century BCE. So far from its having originated in the modern west, the fact is that the modern west is only now catching up with the ancient east! Indeed even within Christianity itself there were expressions of religious pluralism long before the 18th century Enlightenment. Thus Nicholas of Cusa in the 15th century wrote that 'there is only one religion in the variety of rites' (*De Pace Fidei*, 6). So it is an error, born of ignorance, to think that religious pluralism is a modern western invention.

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Let me end now by returning to a point I made at the beginning by asking Why does all this matter? Indeed, does it matter? Well, yes, it does matter a very great deal. We live as part of a world wide human community that is at war with itself. In many places men, women and even children are killing and being killed in conflicts that are both validated and emotionally intensified by religion. And this is possible because each faith has traditionally made its own absolute claim to be the one and only true faith. Absolutes can justify anything. Today, to insist on the unique superiority of your own faith is to be part of the problem. For how can there be stable peace between rival absolutes? In the words of the Catholic theologian Hans Kung, 'There will be no peace among the peoples of this world without peace among the world religions'. And I would add that there will be no real peace among the world religions so long as each thinks of itself as uniquely superior to all the others. Dialogue between the faiths must continue on an ever increasing scale. But the only stable and enduring basis for peace will come about when dialogue leads to a mutual acceptance of the world religions as different but equally valid relationships to the ultimate reality.

c John Hick 2005.

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