# 1 Religious Others

## 1.1 Introduction

What is someone who has a perspective on religious matters to say about those who endorse other perspectives? For example, what is an insider to a religious tradition, a member of the "home tradition," to say about outsiders, which is to say those who neither endorse the insider's religious perspective nor engage in the insider's religious practice?

Insiders – members of the home tradition – sometimes take the view that there is something seriously wrong with outsiders. Thus some insiders contend that the failure of outsiders to endorse their favored beliefs, the endorsement by outsiders of competing beliefs, and, in general, the failure of outsiders to live the life associated with the insiders' religion have their origin in sinfulness or wickedness or perversity or rebelliousness or arrogance or laziness or a failure to think things through, or in being too preoccupied with the passing scene or in some other such defect or set of defects. Outsiders may even be seen as childish or laughable or ridiculous or contemptible or deserving of pity.

On the other hand, insiders sometimes take the very different view that outsiders are, or can be, about as impressive as insiders, all things considered. For example, in their essay "Thinking Outside the Box: Developments in Catholic Understandings of Salvation," Daniel A. Madigan and Diego R. Sarrió Cucarella deploy the idea of *orientation* in the course of explaining what they consider to be the correct perspective for Catholics to have on non-Catholics. These authors say that "[what] has gradually come to be realized over the centuries is that, although many good people are not explicitly members of the Church, they are in effect oriented in the same way. As the Church is oriented to the Reign of God, and hence to Christ, we recognize others who are in effect facing, striving even, in the same direction – desiring the same justice, love and peace that are to be the hallmarks of the Reign of God" (Madigan and Sarrió, 2016: 101).

Moreover, the view of these authors is that God is on the side of a correctly oriented person with no affiliation with the institutional Church to a greater extent than God is on the side of an incorrectly oriented member of the Church. They write that "[there] will be insiders who will not be well oriented to the Reign of God – we all have to admit that at times we ourselves are among them – and there will be outsiders who are admirably oriented to that Reign" and that "it is now recognized that neither actual membership in the Church, nor even an explicit desire for membership, is essential in order for God to orient a person or community toward life in Him" (Madigan and Sarrió, 2016: 103, 110). In general, these authors say that outsiders may be as impressive as

insiders in various important respects. However, as hinted in the sentence I just quoted, their view is also that the correct explanation of cases in which outsiders are correctly oriented is uniquely Christian.

And might outsiders be reasoning just as carefully, and be just as reasonable in their beliefs, as insiders? For example, in his essay "The Islamic Problem of Religious Diversity," Imran Aijaz contends that there is very strong, indeed, in his view, "overwhelming," empirical evidence for the claim that some rational and inculpable nonacceptance of Islamic belief occurs; this is just to say that the claim that there is no rational and inculpable nonacceptance of Islamic belief – a claim he characterizes as traditionally Islamic – is mistaken (Aijaz, 2016: 167). In this essay Imran Aijaz also considers, and rejects, various attempts to deny that there is rational and inculpable nonacceptance of Islamic belief. These include attempts to argue that those who appear not to endorse Islamic belief *only appear* not to do so – that such people secretly and "in their hearts" actually hold Islamic belief to be true. Other attempts to deny that there is rational and inculpable nonacceptance of Islamic belief contend that disobedience and sin are the root cause of nonacceptance of Islamic beliefs so that this nonacceptance is culpable.

These conclusions, incidentally, lead Imran Aijaz to argue that two additional claims – both of which he also characterizes as traditional Islamic ones – are also mistaken. These are the claims that (a) very strong epistemic justification for Islamic belief is available to everyone, which is just to say that everyone has good reason to recognize the truth of Islamic beliefs, and that (b) little or no epistemic justification is available to anyone for holding beliefs incompatible with Islamic belief. And he proposes that Muslim thinkers may therefore wish to rethink their views about non-Muslims and may, in particular, wish to revise radically their concept of a *kafir* (disbeliever).

## 1.2 Religion That Says That Outsiders Have Something Seriously Wrong with Them and That This Accounts for Their Being Outsiders

To be sure, whatever may be our religious perspective, it is difficult to avoid the thought that religious others are below par with us in one particular respect. Anyone who does not endorse our perspective will normally be thought by us to be mistaken and to be missing something important, assuming that the question of what to say about them and their views arises, and an opinion about these matters is formed. If we are to be consistent, we are committed to the belief that those who disagree with us are mistaken so that, at least in this particular

respect, they have a deficiency or flaw that we do not have. If we are right, they are wrong.

What is problematic and unfortunate, however, is the idea that what insiders consider to be the mistaken religious views of outsiders, or the fact that outsiders do not endorse (and may reject) the views of insiders, is best accounted for by, say, human foolishness or sinfulness or wickedness or perversity. There are two problematic ideas here. First, there is the idea that religious outsiders suffer from such serious defects as these. And, second, there is the idea that this accounts for their holding their views or, more broadly, for their being the way they are, religiously speaking.

In another paper, Imran Aijaz mentions some cases in which nonbelief is traced to various putative serious flaws, citing Muslim and Christian examples. In the Muslim case, he quotes from Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who wrote in the course of explaining what Islam has to say about these matters that "Kufr (so-called 'infidelity'), the heinous sin, the incomprehensibly stupid and perverse obduracy, is not unbelief but 'refusal.' It is almost a spitting in God's face when He speaks out of His infinite authority and vast compassion. It is man's dramatic negative response to this spectacular divine initiative" (Aijaz, 2013: 406). And Imran Aijaz quotes from Toshihiko Izutsu, who writes that "the Koranic system reveals a very simple structure based on a clearcut distinction between Muslims and Kâfirs. All Muslims are members of the community . . . And they stand in sharp opposition to those who . . . refuse to listen seriously to Muhammad's teaching and to believe in God" (Aijaz, 2013: 406).

Imran Aijaz mentions too the contention of Christian philosopher William Lane Craig that "when a person refuses to come to Christ, it is never just because of lack of evidence or because of intellectual difficulties: at root, he refuses to come because he willingly ignores and rejects the drawing of God's Spirit on his heart. No one in the final analysis really fails to become a Christian because of lack of arguments; he fails to become a Christian because he loves darkness rather than light and wants nothing to do with God" (Aijaz, 2013: 413). And he also cites the claim of Alvin Plantinga that "[w]ere it not for sin and its effects, God's presence and glory would be as obvious and uncontroversial to us all as the presence of other minds, physical objects, and the past" (Aijaz, 2013: 414).

Now proposals in this area differ in significant ways; indeed, this is so even for the few examples I just provided. Such proposals vary with respect to the extent to which they take nonbelief to be culpable, which is just to say something for which people may reasonably be blamed. For example, nonbelief that issues from original sin or from, say, an inability to understand a complex piece of reasoning may not be the sort of thing for which it is appropriate to blame

someone. On the other hand, wickedness, perversity, willingly ignoring what one would otherwise be aware of, and loving darkness rather than light have the air of culpability about them. However, even in the case in which a failure to believe may seem relatively innocent given the condition or state someone is in, they may be blameworthy for being in that condition or state. Thus a person who does not hold a belief because a complex piece of reasoning that suffices to establish it, and to which he or she she has been exposed, is beyond his or her grasp might be blameworthy for not having cultivated sufficiently her ability to reason. And people might be *partly* to blame, either for failing to believe or for any deficiencies that cause them to do so.

So there are at any rate some strands in these major religious traditions according to which outsiders are seriously flawed, and according to which the relevant flaws are understood to account for their being outsiders. Unfortunately, many people seem to find it easy to go along with the denigration of others that this involves. Whether or not they say this out loud, their attitude to others is along these lines: "Not only is it the case that we are right and you are wrong, what explains this situation is that you, unlike us, are wicked or sinful."

There is often a great deal at stake. For how we think of others can matter profoundly. A situation in which some others are viewed negatively in such fundamental respects as these is risky. Chances are that the relevant others will understand how they are being perceived. They may resent it and if they have a chance they may retaliate. Tensions may arise and the idea that others are wicked or perverse or the like may exacerbate those tensions. Concern about the relevant others – about, say, their welfare or their troubles or the traumas they experience or whether they achieve their aspirations – may be diminished and *this* can have harmful consequences. Worse still, viewing others negatively may make it easier to acquiesce in, say, their being killed or injured or displaced in an unjust war perpetrated by one's coreligionists. The thought might even be that since outsiders are going to hell anyway, there is no great harm in giving them a nudge along the way. Or since God will eventually punish them, there is no great harm in our getting the process of punishment started here and now.

Yasir Qadhi, a Muslim scholar, probes the practical implications of one very negative view of outsiders. He quotes these remarks from Rousseau's *The Social Contract*: "It is impossible to live in peace with those one believes to be damned. To love them would be to hate God who punishes them. It is absolutely necessary either to reclaim them or to torment them" (Qadhi, 2013: 109).[1] And he asks,

[1] This contention from Rousseau certainly is absurd. What accounts for it? It is part of an exuberant sales pitch Rousseau makes in book 4, chapter 8 of *The Social Contract* for what he calls "civil religion." Civil religion consists in a few sentiments that, in his view, are essential to being a good

"[how] can one treat another person with dignity knowing full well that God has damned him or her?" (Qadhi, 2013: 118).

Qadhi's own approach to this matter has two parts. He makes the observation that "mainstream Muslims, Sunnis and Shi'is . . . have often managed to live cordially with people of all faiths throughout history and across geographic regions" (Qadhi, 2013: 118). While his point is clearly correct, the more relevant question is whether Muslims *who believe that God has damned the others in question* have generally managed to live cordially with them. And I think his view is that the correct answer to this question is "yes," which is in effect to say that he rejects Rousseau's absurd claim to the contrary.

Second, Yasir more or less rules out the possibility that anyone could know in the case of a particular person that God has damned them. While he endorses the exclusivist view that rejection of Islam makes one ineligible for salvation, he says that this is so only if one rejects Islam *after one has been exposed to Islam properly*. "God's punishment awaits only those who have received and understood the prophetic message and then willingly and knowingly rejected it" (Qadhi, 2013: 119). Since God alone can judge whether any particular person has been properly exposed to Islam – which he takes to be a matter of having received and understood the prophetic message – it is impossible for anyone to know which individuals are ineligible for salvation. The upshot is that since Muslims are not in a position to assess whether a particular non-Muslim has been exposed to Islam properly, and hence whether the fact that that person is a non-Muslim will result in her being damned, the issue of how to treat people whom one believes to have been damned should not arise in practice. Still, as Yasir acknowledges, the idea that outsiders who have been properly exposed to Islam are damned – even if we add the qualification that we do not know who is in this category – can encourage prejudice and intolerance.

These remarks from Yasir Qadhi raise the question of how the idea of being exposed to Islam *properly* is best understood. Obviously much the same question arises in the case of other religions that consider a person's beliefs to have a bearing on their salvific status, and especially when proper exposure

citizen. These include belief in a God, an afterlife, the reward of the just, the punishment of evildoers, the sanctity of the social contract between the sovereign and the citizens, and, crucially, tolerance of all religions that tolerate others. He endeavors to show the appeal of civil religion by casting various religious alternatives in a negative light – in particular, as involving beliefs about others that will foster social strife. Naturally one wonders why civil religion cannot tolerate groups that *tolerate* those they believe to be damned. For, contrary to what Rousseau says, this occurs. More to the point, a toned-down and more modest claim along these lines is not absurd at all: belief that others around us are damned can have very harmful consequences.

to those beliefs followed by rejection of them is understood to render one ineligible for salvation. I consider this issue of proper exposure in more detail in Section 3.

In his book *States of Ireland*, Conor Cruise O'Brien comments on related themes, this time with a focus on the Northern Ireland conflict: "In theory Irish Catholics and Ulster Protestants shared a religion of love . . . You were supposed to love your neighbour, even of the 'opposite' religion, but as his beliefs and behaviour were obviously so offensive as to mark him out for hell-fire it didn't seem to matter if you knocked him about a bit in this life, if only to prepare him for what was coming to him in the next" (O'Brien, 1972: 308).

However, it goes without saying that there is no reason to impute the harmful attitudes to others under discussion to the majority of Christians or Muslims even though we have seen a couple of Christian and Muslim examples and it would not be hard to find more, or for that matter to find similar attitudes in other religions. And we should acknowledge that for a host of reasons these matters are very complicated in real life. For one thing, when we deal with religious others, our awareness of them *as* religious others will often be just one of a vast set of interconnected ways in which we think of them. We may think of such a person as, say, a relative, neighbor, coworker, friend, fellow gardener, business partner, employer, fellow supporter of all manner of important causes, someone whom we trust as an expert in this or that area, and so on. The awareness of such a person *as* a religious other may be a relatively minor ingredient in the mix and may be obscured or ignored entirely.

Moreover, even if outsiders *are* thought to have serious flaws, insiders may feel that they have abundant reasons to be on good terms with, and friendly toward, them. For example, insiders may feel that there is much that is good and admirable about outsiders in spite of those putative flaws. Or they may take a "live and let live" attitude or exhibit a generosity that has a softening influence. Or they may feel that sincerely bestowed generosity or kindness to the outsider shows their own faith in the best possible light. They may feel or do these things because their own religious perspective calls on them to do so – which is just to say that their own tradition has its own internal resources for combatting the harmful attitudes in question – or for independent reasons. And even when such attitudes *are* harmful, there may be no way to measure *the extent* to which they are harmful – no way to measure the extent to which they exacerbate tensions, diminish concern that insiders would otherwise have for outsiders, promote hostility, and so on. To complicate matters further, when interreligious tensions make their presence felt, there normally are other differences present too; thus there may be competing political or territorial

aspirations or competing historical narratives so that the harmful consequences of religious differences as such may be difficult to discern.

So we should not exaggerate the problem and we should be mindful of complexities such as these. On the other hand, there is no denying the potentially harmful consequences of seeing others as grossly defective – in thinking of them as not just mistaken but as wicked or perverse or the like. After all, whatever defects we attribute to them by way of an explanation of how it is that they disagree with us may have a bearing on, say, *whether* we trust them in other areas or *whether* we befriend them, and so on. And, as I say, tensions *may* arise, and the belief that there is something deeply wrong with them *may* exacerbate those tensions. It happens frequently. There is no escaping the fact that such attitudes can be dangerous. They are also unkind and unimpressive. And we can do much better.

## 1.3 Religious Ambiguity

The best response to religion that says that outsiders have something seriously wrong with them and that this accounts for their holding their views has a number of components, and I lay these out in the remainder of Section 1.

For one thing, we have available a better explanation of why others disagree with us about religious matters.

This better explanation is that the human situation is religiously ambiguous. What I mean by this, in brief, is that the following conditions hold. (I pursue this topic in more detail in McKim, 2012: chapter 7, and I draw on that discussion here.) There is a significant amount of evidence for more than one religious perspective; none of the competing perspectives can be proven correct and the evidence does not clearly favor one perspective over the others; each group has its own evidence to which it can appeal; the evidence as a whole is diverse in its character, multifaceted, and complicated; and the evidence is so abundant that a comprehensive perspective that is developed by taking account of all of it is out of the question. Only a partial perspective is feasible, and the task of disambiguating the situation currently far exceeds our abilities.

If the human religious situation is ambiguous, matters of religious significance are open to being reasonably interpreted in a variety of ways, and no position on religious matters that is currently endorsed is obviously correct. Consensus about matters of religious significance is unlikely to occur, and the pursuit of truth in this area, even when engaged in with effort, care, and sincerity – and whether engaged in individually or at the communal level, and however skilled those who engage in it may be – is unlikely to lead everyone to the same conclusions. The situation would be entirely different

if, say, atheism or Sunni Islam or Roman Catholicism or some type of animism were clearly correct in its claims about how things are. But it is not so.

Many religious people consider religious experiences they enjoy to be part of their evidence for their religious perspective. (Or at any rate, if questioned and if they had an opportunity to reflect on the matter, they would agree that this is so.) For example, many people who believe that there is a God understand, say, a sense that God is guiding them or strengthening them or inspiring them to be part of their evidence that there is a God. Some people who understand their own religious experiences to be part of their relevant evidence are willing to take another step and to consider the religious experiences of others to be part of the total evidence that pertains to what is true in the area of religion.[2] If they are correct, and I think they are, then for this reason alone no one can have access to all of the available evidence. In particular, each of us lacks access to what it would be like to endorse, and live in accordance with, numerous other perspectives, with whatever experiences are attendant upon doing so.

## 1.4 Religious Ambiguity and Religious Others

Because of religious ambiguity, the fact that there are outsiders who do not believe what we believe is not such a great puzzle and it is unnecessary and unreasonable to suppose that there is anything seriously wrong with others in virtue of their not believing as we believe. Ambiguity provides a way to liberate people from such thoughts. Shortly I argue that it provides part of the foundation for a broader approach to others that avoids attributing serious flaws to them.

In general religious ambiguity provides a positive and pleasing way to explain religious diversity. It provides a way to combine the idea that we – whoever we may be – are right with the idea that others are about as reasonable as we are even if, in our view, they are wrong. It enables us to see it as understandable that outsiders disagree with us and that they are not that impressed by what we have to say and not that attracted by what we have to offer. And this includes outsiders who have heard what we have to say but who are not convinced, and who have therefore ignored or failed to respond to, or who may even have rejected, what we consider most valuable. For what a recognition of ambiguity commits us to is that positions other than our own have associated with them bodies of evidence to which their adherents can appeal and that positions other than our own can therefore be rationally endorsed.

[2] This move is central to John Hick's defense of his pluralistic hypothesis. See, e.g., Hick (1989: 228).

Even if we know little about what makes the views of others reasonable, such as the character of their distinctive religious experiences, we should at least be aware that there probably is much that does so. And if we don't know what it is, we might set out to try to learn something about it. And we might consider that for us not to know about it probably is as much a matter of a flaw in us as it is a matter of a flaw in them, and it may well be neither. Moreover, once we acknowledge the fact of religious ambiguity we can readily see through attempts to discredit those who disagree with us religiously by attributing serious flaws to them.

Religious ambiguity can even help us to understand those particular "outsiders" who used to be insiders: that is, those who used to endorse what we believe but who have changed their minds and no longer do so, perhaps even rejecting their former beliefs. Given ambiguity, it is not surprising that people sometimes change their minds. And this is so for two reasons, at least: first, their antecedently held position is not clearly correct and, second, there are other perspectives that have a lot going for them, and this may apply to their newly adopted perspective. It may have its own body of sustaining evidence.

I say "*may* have its own body of sustaining evidence" for there is no reason to think that everyone who endorses other positions does so rationally, or even that *most* people who endorse other positions do so rationally. Surely there must be cases in which flaws may legitimately be imputed to those who disagree with us and, more to the point, in which their not believing as we believe may legitimately be traced to those flaws. The implausible idea that all failure to believe as we believe arises from, say, perversity or wickedness is completely different from the plausible idea that there are *cases* of unbelief that arise from some such serious defect. It would be unwise to propose that *all* religious diversity is to be accounted for by appeal to religious ambiguity.

Correspondingly, though, we should not assume that everyone who endorses *our* position, whatever it may be, does so rationally. Probably a good operating assumption is that whatever flaws are relevant in the case of others are as likely to be found within our group as they are to be found in theirs. Wickedness, perversity, carelessness, laziness, conformism, failing to ask important questions when you ought to do so, and the like are as likely to account for *our* holding or retaining our beliefs as they are to account for others doing so. Indeed, such flaws probably are about as widely distributed among us as they are among others – especially if we extend our purview across countries, cultures, and historical epochs. Roughly speaking, we are all doing equally well in terms of belief management. These are, at any rate, good operating assumptions – positions to be endorsed until given reason to believe otherwise.

## 1.5 Recognizing Our Own Deficiencies and Recognizing That Others May Be Suffering from No More Deficiencies Than One's Coreligionists

There is a certain sort of awareness of being deficient – that is, of their own deficiencies – that *all* people with a perspective on religious matters should share. This arises in part from the fact that a vast array of relevant considerations bear on the plausibility of the claims of religious traditions. The vast amount of relevant religious experience is one subset of these relevant considerations, but only one among many.

So a sincere and observant Muslim, for example, might acknowledge that he she lacks an understanding of, say, the Wesleyan idea of sanctification or of the experiences reported on by those who believe themselves to be in this state of sanctification or of what it is like to live in earnest expectation of achieving it, assuming that he or she indeed lacks this understanding. Or a devoted Catholic might acknowledge that he or she has no understanding of the Buddhist idea of a Bodhisattva, or of what it is like to live in the grip of this idea of postponing your own final release and serving as a "refuge" or "shelter" until everyone has achieved enlightenment, and to see yourself as playing this self-sacrificial role in the lives of others, assuming that he or she lacks this understanding. Or a devout Lutheran might admit that he or she has no understanding of Navajo religion, of its implications for how we should treat nonhuman animals, or of what it is like to experience the world around us, including nonhuman animals, while looking at things in this way. And so on. And this is just to mention some relevant *religious experiences*. The vast array of relevant considerations that bear on the plausibility of the claims of the religious traditions also includes, for example, developments in cosmology and in neuroscience that bear on the plausibility or the meaning of various religious claims. There is abundant scope here for everyone to acknowledge his or her limitations – limitations that in this case are entirely unavoidable and hence inculpable. To do so is far better than to find fault with outsiders.

Moreover, many perspectives on religious matters are endorsed by people of integrity. By "people of integrity" I mean people who, at least in the ideal case, know a great deal, avoid exaggeration, admit ignorance when appropriate, have an interest in the truth, and are sincere, decent, reflective, and so on. People of this caliber can be found in many religious traditions, and, indeed, among those who endorse secular perspectives.[3] I propose both that such people are no more common in any one tradition than they are in the others and that people who approximate to this ideal to one degree or another are similarly distributed.

[3] I discuss this topic further and probe some of its implications in McKim (2001: 129ff.).