

Introduction

THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF RELIGIONS IN THE WORLD, AND MANY of them make claims to truth which contradict the claims of other religions. I am concerned to ask why this is so, and whether this huge diversity puts all particular claims to religious truth in question, since there seems little evidence to settle which claims are true. My general conclusion will be that diversity in religion is natural and good, and that there are rational ways of discriminating between religious truth-claims.

Part I raises some questions about the nature of religion in general. Without trying to provide a definition of 'religion', I begin with a discussion of Durkheim's well-known definition, suggesting that he gives a valuable account of the behavioural aspects of religion, but undervalues the doctrinal and experiential aspects. These three dimensions – the doctrinal, experiential, and behavioural (which includes ritual, ethics, and institutional aspects) – set the framework for my own discussion.

Truth-claims clearly belong to the doctrinal dimension, but they need to be interpreted in the light of the other two dimensions, which makes them symbolic and ambiguous in many ways. I suggest that they outline ways of life in relation to a spiritual dimension, believed to be known by people of exceptional experience, and they are oriented to the production of human good and the avoidance of harm. Religious symbols are finite expressions of spiritual powers, and the symbols change and develop in unique historical and cultural contexts. The history of religions is the history of how such symbols develop as modifications of or reactions to the religious practices of their immediate past.

Part II examines the claim that there is a 'perennial philosophy' or esoteric core underlying all religions and enshrined in some primordial tradition. I show that this is not the case, and that the claim privileges the Indian school of *Advaita Vedanta*, associated mainly with the eighth-century CE

sage Sankara. There are other forms of Vedanta, especially that associated with the twelfth-century Ramanuja, that are more characteristic of the devotional traditions of India. Thus, the ‘perennial’ view is just one interpretation of Vedanta, a form of Idealism, holding that ultimately only Spirit exists.

Idealism is itself just one major stream of religious thought, and I pick out four such streams as covering the main possible sorts of religiously significant relation between a spiritual dimension and the physical cosmos. The others are: radical dualism, separating Spirit from matter, and looking for release from the material (an example would be some forms of Theravada Buddhism); monism, identifying Spirit and matter as two aspects of one reality, and often making Spirit inseparable from matter (for instance, Confucianism, which is mainly concerned that human lives should be in harmony with ‘the Way of Heaven’); and theism, seeing matter as dependent on Spirit (characteristic of the Abrahamic religions). These four streams can overlap in many ways, but they have developed historically as distinct traditions.

I examine the perennialist writings of Aldous Huxley, Frithjof Schuon, and Huston Smith, and conclude that experience alone cannot support their view, so it depends on a largely unacknowledged acceptance of one Indian tradition of revelation. It does, however, develop a sophisticated view of religion as a common quest for a supreme existent Good of wisdom, compassion, and bliss, to be attained by the overcoming of the egoistic self, leading to increasing mediation of and eventual union with the Good. I think this could in a general way characterise reflective forms of all four streams of religious thought, but it allows for many differences of detail between them. The failure of perennialism suggests that there are many partial ways of knowing the Supreme Good, none of them complete, and that a fuller grasp of religious truth still lies in the future.

Part III considers some major historical changes in human understanding that call for a revision and development of all ancient religious claims.

One very obvious change is the growth of the scientific world-view, which has completely altered conceptions of the place of humans in the wider universe. Another is the rise of critical studies of ancient texts, which has implications for any religion which claims to be based on such texts (like the Bible). I take Rudolf Bultmann as a Christian theologian who accepts both these changes, and consequently speaks of ‘de-mythologising’ Christian doctrines. I argue that his programme of subjectivising all ontological religious claims is unsustainable, but that he succeeds in showing that much of Scripture must be interpreted symbolically, and this leads to the existence of

many variant interpretations, dependent upon the historical context and the personal experiences of the interpreters.

A further influence arising from the European Enlightenment is epitomised in the work of Immanuel Kant, who argued for full freedom of speech and belief ('Think for yourself') and for the autonomy of morals. The argument against censorship and the unthinking acceptance of ancient authority has generally been found to be compelling, although one should also be prepared to learn from the past and acknowledge that there are authorities that should be listened to. Kant's argument for moral autonomy has been more contentious. Its main point is that moral demands are categorical, objective, necessary, and achievable, and they lay down the two main ethical goals of human flourishing and happiness. All alleged revelations must be tested by these criteria for their moral acceptability.

Kant's principles ought to lead to the espousal of full equality of concern for all persons without exception, but the rise of feminist, ecological, and liberation thought in the twentieth-century shows that there remain deep patriarchal, racist, and hierarchical elements in both religious and moral thought. A consideration of feminist writing brings out how movements critical of these elements have arisen in both religious and secular contexts, and have changed the moral landscape, although they have also caused deep divisions in contemporary thinking about morality and about religion.

In part of his thought, which is often ignored, Kant also held that there is a radical evil in human nature, and so a need for something like divine forgiveness and help in order to achieve the human moral goal. This led him to postulate God, moral freedom, and immortality, and to commend a 'moral religion'. He did not wholly separate morality and religion, but insisted that the role of religion is to support and confirm our moral beliefs. Thus, in his view, religion has an important role in providing a foundation for morality, and religious and moral beliefs are intertwined. His arguments have proved contentious, but it has become widely agreed that both tolerance of the adoption of conscientiously held beliefs and the testing of religious claims against independently held moral beliefs are necessary parts of any justifiable religion.

The Enlightenment had a greater impact on Christianity than on most religions because the eighteenth-century Enlightenment was a mainly European movement. Friedrich Schleiermacher reflected the intellectual turmoil affecting Christianity by calling for a completely new approach to religious belief. Instead of being founded on a past revelation of inerrant doctrines, he proposed that authentic religious belief begins with a distinctive sort of 'intuition' and 'feeling'. This is an experience of 'the infinite' in and through

finite things and events. He was one of the first scholars to see religion as a global phenomenon, and to hold that all religions are based on such intuitions, each one developing from a distinctive basic intuition associated with its founder and being part of a rich variety of religious forms, all of which are good and necessary. Slightly alarmed by his own thesis, he later held that Christianity was the most adequate form of religion. Thereby he bequeathed to his successors the problem of reconciling commitment to one particular religion with acceptance that all (or many) religions are more or less equally acceptable. Positively, he placed Christian faith firmly within a global context, and focussed on transcendent experiences, not intellectual dogmas, as the heart of religious belief.

Another element of post-Enlightenment thought is the rejection of Aristotelian philosophy and the search to replace it with a more evolutionary perspective. Hegel is a philosopher who sees religious development as a self-unfolding of Absolute Spirit, and who sees religions as 'pictorial' expressions of that philosophy. The Hegelian view is by no means accepted by all (or even by many) contemporary philosophers, but it shows one way in which some people can see religions as positing a creatively unfolding purpose of Spirit in history, with a goal yet to be fully manifested, rather than being based on a past final and complete revelation. It also illustrates how the metaphors and symbols of religious speech can be given a non-literal but realistic basis within the world-view of modern science.

Seeing religions as part of one stream of interconnected causal influences was the result of the genesis of a new historical consciousness, given classical expression by Ernst Troeltsch. He held that each religion must be placed within a changing flow of events, and that each present has an immediate past context which generates its own unique problems. There are many diverse contextual paths of religion, and they are interconnected paths of continual and unpredictable change. Nevertheless, he claimed to detect tendencies to an absolute goal in the historical process, and he thought that Christianity was the 'normative religion' which (in a revised and liberal form) set the standard of a personalist and redemptive religion. He later came to doubt this privileging of Christianity, and to commend a historically aware, open, and developmental approach to all religions. His chief contribution to the study of religions was to see them not as blocks of ahistorical truths, but as changing and developing parts of wider social processes.

I have concentrated on these five writers both because their work is of intrinsic interest and because they responded in influential ways to the new problems for religious thought posed by the European Enlightenment. Their responses are all contentious in various ways, but the problems are

real. To be rationally sustainable, religions must ally with the best modern science and with textual criticism; they must accept that ancient moral rules must often be adapted to new circumstances and that they should be conducive to universal human flourishing; they must attempt to find some plausible general world-view within which religions can find a place; they must adopt an informed global and historically conscious outlook; and they should accept that conceptual descriptions of ultimate reality are not free of local and changing linguistic and cultural influences.

All these factors can function as criteria for assessing the adequacy of religious views, and they point to the need for some sort of revision to ancient religious views. Such revision can take more or less extreme forms. One influential response, seen in part in both Schleiermacher and Troeltsch, has been the development of religious pluralism, which refuses to privilege one religion as superior to or normative for others, and which tries to see all religions as authentic paths to an ultimate reality and truth.

Part IV examines the work of John Hick and Cantwell Smith, and argues that pluralism, as they describe it, is not a coherent hypothesis. Hick's claim that we know nothing of the Real-in-itself is paradoxical, since he also holds that there is just one supreme Good. It also seems that he tends to run together questions of the truth of religious propositions and questions of how one might attain salvation. I suggest that one needs to distinguish these questions, for people can be 'saved' even if they believe some false things. I argue that salvation may be inclusive – all can be saved – while truth must be exclusive – contradictions cannot both be true. Perhaps final salvation requires knowledge of the truth, but paths towards salvation do not. Thus, one should distinguish questions of final salvation from questions of ways leading towards final salvation.

It is also useful to distinguish particular truth-claims (like 'There is a God') from the complex sets of related truth-claims typically found in religious traditions. Particular truths may be scattered among religions (many religions believe there is a God), but some religions may contain, in addition, many more dubious truth-claims, some may have more, or more important, truths than others, and all religions may contain some mistakes. Thus, it may not be helpful to hold that religions as such should fit an 'exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist' model, even though particular truth-claims may more plausibly be fitted into such a framework.

Even then, however, religious truth-claims are often poetic or inadequately phrased or indefinite in meaning, and this means that it is very difficult to say whether they exclude, include, or are compatible with truth-claims from a different tradition. It may be helpful to contrast more

restrictive interpretations with more open interpretations of such claims. I consider some major disputed doctrines between Islam and Christianity, to show how more convergent, although still diverse, interpretations of important religious truth-claims are possible and helpful.

Cantwell Smith goes even further than Hick, and suggests that we should stop using the word 'religion', which divides up historical traditions into opposing blocks. We should see many symbols used in differing cumulative traditions for the Transcendent and look for a future convergence towards truly global theology. I argue that the word 'religion' is still useful in referring to religious founders and canonical Scriptures, and that there will probably always be differences in understanding the nature of the supreme values and goals of religious practice. Nevertheless, these pluralists make the interesting suggestion that religious revelations do not have to be seen as full and final, but are likely to be partial and culture-influenced. It is possible to see religious traditions as developing by understanding and reflecting in their own way the traditions of others, and that may be a way in which religions can live more peaceably and creatively together.

Most of the writers I have considered have been liberal Protestants, so in Part V I examine the work of five Roman Catholic theologians to show how thinking about religion has changed within a more conservative religious tradition. Karl Rahner held that pluralism should not exist, and that adherents of non-Christian religions might be seen as 'anonymous Christians'. Hans Kung held that Jesus is a normative standard in religion, but he wished to move the norm from the institution of the Catholic Church to God as seen in Jesus. Raimon Panikkar agreed that Jesus is historically *sui generis*, and embodied what he called 'cosmotheandric reality', the union of divine and human. But, he held that Christ has many forms and is truly known in some way in all faiths. Paul Knitter denied (although ambiguously) that Christ was normative, and asserted that no religion has a monopoly of truth, and that there is a common ground and goal of all religions. Peter Phan affirmed that all religions are paths to salvation, and that pluralism is good and divinely willed.

These Catholic thinkers show a move from a rigorous exclusivism towards accepting some form of pluralism, although even Professor Phan calls himself an 'inclusivist-pluralist', believing that, in the end, Christ is the only Saviour. They are clear that there is an absolute truth, but not so sure that just one religion grasps it fully, and aware that religious understanding often develops through critical appreciation of and interaction with different traditions.

Part VI provides a case study of one recent interaction between Christian and Buddhists. It shows both convergence and contradictions arising, and

INTRODUCTION

7

some creative re-shaping of doctrinal formulations as each tradition seeks to understand the other. It also shows how very internally diverse each tradition is, and how religious beliefs are formed within traditions of personal experience and social history, traditions which continue to change, partly as a result of the interaction of cultural and political, as well as of purely religious factors.

My conclusion is that religious diversity is not a problem. It is natural and good, and an incentive to the continuing search for a truth not yet fully understood. In a process of dialectical interaction, in which one partly embraces and partly rejects aspects of the main alternative views that seem relevant to one's own historical situation, religious understanding continually develops. Or at least one hopes it develops, as the demand – itself a major demand of religion – to seek fuller truth, beauty, and goodness exerts its influence. Religious diversity will continue to exist for the foreseeable future. What matters above all is that such diversity should be seen as a challenge to fuller understanding in our many ways of pursuing the search for a supreme objective Good, making for universal human well-being.