

1 One World

1.1 The Problem of Religious Diversity

Religious diversity brings with it a whole set of religious and philosophical problems. It must, however, be seen in the context of wider views of human diversity, and, indeed, of whether the adjective ‘human’ carries much weight. Is there is such a thing as ‘being human’ outside particular social contexts? For some, the very words ‘difference’, ‘diversity’, ‘multiculturalism’, ‘tolerance’, are clarion calls to accept the multifarious nature of human societies. Social variation seems far more salient than the fact that they have anything in common.

In the field of religion, in particular, this acceptance of difference can be made to seem naive and simplistic. To put it bluntly, when there are so many religions, why should any of them be believed as true? The invocation of the idea of truth jars against the happy acceptance of difference. Perhaps some, and maybe all, religious believers are deluded into accepting obviously false beliefs. Richard Dawkins, in one of his diatribes against religion, starts his argument with the fact of religious diversity. He says, in a chapter ironically entitled *So Many Gods!*, ‘I don’t believe in any of the hundreds and hundreds of sky gods, river gods, sea gods, sun gods . . . so many gods to not believe in’.¹ He concludes, ‘People growing up in different countries copy their parents and believe in the god or gods of their own country. Those beliefs contradict each other, so they can’t all be right’.²

Dawkins, however, assumes that there is such a thing as being ‘right’. Truth matters to him, and he holds that it is true that there is no God, or gods. There is, however, a temptation of long-standing not to make judgements about other people’s beliefs, and even to assume that there can be different ‘truths’. Yet that itself brings up the question of what reasons each person can have for particular beliefs. If truth is not of universal significance, perhaps we ourselves have little reason to maintain our existing beliefs. Why should we even imagine that there is an objective truth that all should aspire to? Yet, as we shall see, that idea is at the root of monotheistic religion, and it is transferred to modern science. It is an idea stemming from monotheism, but, paradoxically, used against it by atheists such as Dawkins.

How should we confront the fact of diversity? This is of particular importance in religion where, for many, diversity of religious belief presents as much an obstacle against faith, as, say, the venerable problem of suffering. Religious diversity is, however, part of a wider problem. It raises deep questions about the

¹ R. Dawkins, *Outgrowing God*, p. 6 ² Dawkins, p. 10

possibility of human rationality, the role of human freedom and the accessibility of truth. No consideration of diversity should avoid these larger issues.

1.2 Diversity and Power

In the present age, diversity is celebrated more often than it is defined. At root is a horror, perhaps in the Western world stemming from post-imperialist guilt, of the imposition through power of one set of beliefs or practices over apparently alien ones. Difference, it seems, should be respected. A desire that everyone be like ‘us’ in our beliefs and practices appears intolerant, and probably racist. It seems to assume, illegitimately, our superiority over others. There is a conflation, often deliberate, between the views a person holds and the nature of that person. What is taken for knowledge or fact is allegedly the outworking of power structures. Appeals to truth become the mere imposition of power by one group over a weaker one.

An important step to this kind of analysis is the idea that there is no such thing as human reason, any more than there is such a grouping as ‘humanity’. There are instead multiple forms of rationality, different ways of reasoning. This may be unexceptionable. The methods of science, for example, may not be simply transferable to religion. Yet to suggest that there are different rationalities is another position entirely. If there is not a more basic set of rational capabilities, common to all human beings, different humans are cut off from each other. This results in a rigid distinction between different intellectual disciplines, different epochs, different races and so on. Alister McGrath, who himself still wants an ontological unity, has described the situation well when he refers to ‘a growing realisation that both the beliefs we hold and the rationality through which we develop and assess those beliefs, are embedded in cultural contexts’.³ One may wonder who ‘we’ are in this context. The use of the collective pronoun itself suggests a continuing commonality that the picture implicitly denies. The stress is on what he terms the ‘historicity of rationality’, and is distinguished from ahistorical thinking that assumes we can abstract people from their social context, and interrogate them as equals.

It is a basic assumption of much of the history of philosophy that there are sufficient points of contact between, say, Plato and Aristotle and ourselves to make the study of their work still relevant. The same reasoning applies to theology. If, for example, the New Testament operates with forms of rationality alien to ourselves, why study it? If the manner in which we sense and interpret the world is determined by influences which, by definition, may be beyond our knowledge and control, as some cultural influences could be, we are locked into

³ A. McGrath, *The Territories of Human Reason*, p. 22

systems of thought which can have little overlap with each other. We see the world our way and others see it theirs, and it is easy to say how any idea of the unity of that world can be lost. We cannot think that we live in the same world our forbears did, so their views will not only be opaque to us, they are actually irrelevant to our needs and interests.

Much has been made in recent decades of the postmodernist reaction against modernist views of rationality, seen as the product of the Enlightenment. Beliefs vary across cultures, not least because available evidence about the world has varied. The invention of telescopes and microscopes provided an example of how available technology can be a crucial factor in the development of knowledge. Saying that the criteria of what is reasonable is culturally situated, however, means more. It suggests that human rationality is itself the product of time and place. The result will be a never-ending splintering of ways of understanding. Even an idea of modernity, with its universalist pretensions and challenged by postmodernism, can itself splinter. Many wish to turn from the idea of reason as an innate mental faculty, common to all humans, to a study of differing social practices. A common human hunger for the divine and the search for it, can be reduced to analysis of different forms of religious practice. The embedding of language in practices, and a recognition of different forms of life has been characteristic of the work of the later Wittgenstein. He has exercised a vast influence not just in twentieth century philosophy but also in such fields as social anthropology.

It is tempting to generalise one's own views and hold that they should be accepted by everyone everywhere. This is particularly true in religion where a universalising influence can lead, as we shall see, to intolerance and lack of respect for, or sympathy for, other religions and forms of religious practice. When we move our attention from what is real and true, to what is believed in all its multifarious forms, whether in religion or elsewhere, diversity can itself seem to be the ultimate fact. The focus moves from what beliefs purport to be about to the fact of the beliefs themselves. Once we convince ourselves that rationality cannot transcend difference but is itself constituted by diversity, everything becomes relative to culture. We are then culturally embedded and cannot aspire to a 'God's eye view', seeing things as they really are. We must recognise that our view is always from somewhere. Our interest has to be on the fact and location of belief rather than its target. The inescapable conclusion will be that, just as we cannot attain God's view, we can know nothing about God or the gods as they are in themselves. We are the creation of our cultures and everything will reflect that, including our theology or any understanding of what lies beyond our beliefs or is transcendent.

An illustration of this is the undoubted loss of confidence in the traditional foundations of Western culture. At times, the imposition of Western ways of doing things were at best silly, and at worst harmful, to those with their own traditions and customs. Does that, though, mean that Western standards of knowledge, however imperfect, were themselves never any better than those of colonial subjects? Were those who took Western medicine, and Western standards of schooling, to those who knew neither, merely guilty of imposing their standards on others? Should Western science and medicine have claimed no more for themselves than could the incantations of witch doctors? Were missionaries merely guilty of using imperial power to enforce their view of the world on others? If so, any claim to truth, in science, religion or elsewhere, becomes simply an exercise of power.

In any consideration of religion and diversity, we must ask whether even an assertion of monotheism is itself an exercise of power by some people. If carried to extremes, this attitude undermines all rationality, all understanding of any truth to be discovered, and all appreciation of a reality beyond us that can constrain our beliefs. All, as Nietzsche said, is interpretation. Who is right? The idea of being right has to disappear, along with all possibility of truth. All we are left with is the mere fact of diversity. That itself, however can no longer be seen as objective fact but is itself only constituted by our present social beliefs.

When the content of what is said is subordinated to the issue of who is saying it and their particular situation, it is not surprising that identity politics comes to the fore. Who I am becomes more important than what I might be claiming. The interests at work, it will be claimed, invalidate any idea that I could be engaged in the dispassionate search for what everyone should recognise is true. So-called intersectionality has spread its influence from sociology across the humanities. The idea has been that social inequality, for example, should not be explained merely by class, gender, or race alone. Yet as one writer on intersectionality has put it, such categories cannot themselves be fixed concepts. She insists that 'each of these social categories is fluid, contextual, and open to debate'.⁴ Such social categories can themselves be seen as the operation of power structures. Hierarchies of power can be as potent in academic disciplines as anywhere else. Social identities are thus themselves seen as constructed. At each level of understanding – from ordinary interactions in society to the most abstruse level of sociological explanation – everything is reduced to the operation of power structures. They are at their most potent when unacknowledged, so denial of their existence can itself seem to give evidence of their potency. Once everything is explained in terms of 'systems of power, manifested in social

⁴ M. Romero, *Introducing Intersectionality*, p. 6

relationships of dominance and subordination', we have totally undermined any possibility of explanation.⁵ All is lost in an infinite regress of suspicion. We ourselves have nowhere to stand.

When all claims to truth and to understanding the world are controlled by ideas current in societies that are themselves merely controlled by the pursuit of power by a hegemonic group, the idea of truth must collapse. We are told that intersectionality is a tool for 'creating new systems of knowledge for greater understanding of domination and resistance'.⁶ It attempts to unmask privileges obtained as a result of identities linked to existing systems of power. Yet at each stage, any assertion about alleged facts can be challenged as the mere expression of a system of power. Whenever humans can interact, as they do when they use language, they can be accused of using whatever position they hold as a subtle form of domination. The same approach can be levelled against the accuser, and then one is involved in a spiral of recrimination and claims of bad faith. Truth becomes inaccessible, as does any notion of the world 'as it is in itself'. All that matters is the identity of the person making the claims, and that itself will be contestable. Language becomes detached from the world and then can no longer be understood as referring to anything beyond itself. Its function as a means of communication is put in doubt. It even becomes unclear how a language can ever be learnt. We have to recognise and reidentify objects in the world around us and assume they are the same for everyone. We all live in one world, whatever its nature and extent, and, as humans, all normally have similar access to it. There is, it can be said, one human nature. That is why we can hope to understand people who may at first seem very alien.⁷ We would not be able to make such an assumption about real aliens, such as the archetypal Martians. Even then we might be able to assume that since they were living in the same universe they were constrained by, and reacting to, the same physical world that confronts all human beings. Their 'nature' and sensory equipment could, however, be very different.

Such assumptions are put into question by forms of relativism that relate the idea of truth, and of reality, to the beliefs that may be held. Relativism, by its nature, cannot talk of what is the case without reference to who holds beliefs about it. The fact of belief becomes more significant than what the belief is about, or its content. Such relativism has a long pedigree, and Plato argued in his dialogue, *Theaetetus*, that it has to be self-contradictory. In the dialogue, Socrates portrays the sophist, Protagoras, as saying that each of us 'is a measure of what is and is not'.⁸ 'Man is the measure of all things' in

⁵ Romero, p. 114 ⁶ Romero, p. 58

⁷ For more on understanding other cultures, see R. Trigg, *Understanding Social Science*.

⁸ *Theaetetus*, 166d

Protagoras's famous dictum, and the doctrine was extended to whole societies. He said that 'whatever practices seem right and laudable to any particular state are so, for that state, as long as it holds them'.⁹ Socrates then goes on to point out the Protagoras must admit that everyone's opinion is true (at least for the holders, we may add). Protagoras has to accept that if others reject his doctrine, his doctrine is false for them. Underlying this is the realisation that assertion in language involves claims to truth. If all claims to truth have to be relative, even relativism cannot coherently be stated, let alone claimed to be true. The relativists will in the end have to be convicted of saying something like, 'It is true there is no such thing as truth', or 'it is an objective fact about the world that there are no objective facts'.

Such relativism has sometimes been applied to science in what has been termed the sociology of knowledge. The result can be devastating. Science itself can be cut adrift from any claim about physical reality, because it is seen merely as the product of a particular culture. It can be dismissed as 'Western' science. Even more insidiously, it can be seen as part of some power structure conferring privilege on some and subordination on others. Post-modernism has been very adept at challenging the pretensions of science, and its claim to be operating a rationality that holds universally.

1.3 Different Religions

One reason that relativism is so easily accepted is our confrontation, given modern forms of communication, with the diversity of belief and practice that exists across the world. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the area of religion. It seems tempting for many to dismiss different religions as merely true for the particular believers but having no relevance to the rest of us. Yet this was a problem recognised by the ancient Greeks. Their polytheistic religion did not stand up to the rational scrutiny of thinkers from the very beginnings of philosophy. One of the so-called pre-Socratic philosophers, Xenophanes of Ionia, is known to us only in fragments of his thought. Writing around the beginning of the fifth century BC, he exposed the anthropomorphic character of any human understanding of gods, saying, for instance, that 'Ethiopians say their gods are snub nosed and black, Thracians that theirs are blue eyed and red haired'.¹⁰ Xenophanes was not impressed by humans' ability to see gods in their own image. This stems from a general inability to think in terms other than those with which we are familiar. The result can be to relativise judgement and beliefs to the people holding them. Xenophanes claimed if horses had the ability to draw, they would picture gods as horses.

⁹ *Theaetetus* 167c ¹⁰ Xenophanes, fr 16 (in Kirk, Raven and Schofield)

Theological notions, even of a primitive kind, can then be judged as a projection of human characteristics. Xenophanes was certainly suspicious of anthropocentric reasoning, and was critical of traditional Greek polytheism as portrayed in Homer and Hesiod.¹¹ He saw the Greek gods as merely reflecting bad human characteristics, such as theft and adultery. Such portrayals come from a desire to understand the gods as possessing human traits, but to a greater degree than ordinary mortals.

Yet Xenophanes seemed to be pointing to a reality that should not be seen merely in human terms, nor as the reflection of the peculiarities of one society. One fragment has fascinated scholars, since he claimed that ‘one god is greatest among gods and men, not at all like mortals in body or thought’.¹² That tears theology away from folk religion, and abstracts the nature of the divine from particular beliefs in particular places. Some have seen in the fragment the glimmerings of a monotheism that did become explicit in later Greek philosophy.

From the very beginnings of Western philosophy, a century before Plato or Aristotle, diversity of belief in general, and religious diversity in particular, caused problems. The more one concentrated on the fact of belief, the more the anthropocentric character of many religious beliefs was obvious. There was a greater knowledge of different customs and practices in different places. Philosophy, like all intellectual disciplines, tends to operate within a presupposition that there is a universal truth to be sought after. Yet the accusation that one is simply proselytising, so as to spread one’s own belief system in religion or elsewhere, can be effective. How can anyone assume a position of omniscience so they can dismiss other people’s beliefs? We have to face the philosophical question of what entitles us to believe that anything lies beyond the cacophony of conflicting beliefs, particularly in the field of religion. The challenge of which, if any, of all the diverse religions confronting us should be accepted still confronts us. Yet a genuine relativist cannot even acknowledge the objective fact of difference and diversity. What is different for us may be different from what is different for other people. We get caught in a never-ending cycle of incomprehension. It is been recognised in the philosophy of science and elsewhere that positing different worlds in whatever context must lead to an incommensurability between them. They cannot be compared. What counts as data in one world will not in another. Cogent evidence in one world will be ignored in another.

In what is now regarded as a classic in the philosophy of science, though still controversial, Thomas Kuhn in the 1960s introduced the word ‘paradigm’. This

¹¹ Xenophanes, fr 11 ¹² Xenophanes, fr 23

referred to the different conceptual schemes with which scientists operate to interpret the physical world after a so-called scientific revolution. An example would be the transition from classical to quantum mechanics. The result is that, as Kuhn claimed, ‘after a revolution, scientists work in a different world’.¹³ Certainly they see the world differently, but do they work in a different world? That makes reality depend on whatever beliefs happen to be held by scientists, and would undermine the possibility of genuine physical science. Common sense suggests that we live in a real world which is often resistant to our own efforts and intentions. We bump into things. Yet for Kuhn, and subsequent social constructivists even in the field of science, reality becomes a reflection of human belief rather than its target.¹⁴

If we believe in many gods, it can be said we live in a different world from those who believe in the one God. If we are atheists, we appear to live in a different world from either. Who is right? Yet no one can be. Everyone is justified within their own world by the terms of their own beliefs. There is nowhere external, no one real world, where anyone can even in principle stand. The post-modernist rejection of Enlightenment rationality ensures that, in some quarters, reason is seen as the product of the presuppositions of the particular world we inhabit. In science, there can be no neutral data or neutral evidence. Everything is already the product of a particular theory. An added ingredient for some is that all is governed by the cynical exercise of power. Nietzsche’s influence lives on particularly in the work of the twentieth-century French post-modernist philosopher and social theorist, Foucault, who stressed the role of power. The inevitable result is the splintering of human understanding. There can be no common ground, and no way of translating one conceptual scheme, tradition or religion into another.

There is a truth in this. It is easy to interpret an alien religion in terms, say, that are familiar to Christianity but which fundamentally misrepresents it. It is wrong to assume that other religions are somehow inferior forms of Christianity, when they can be totally different. In similar fashion, it can be a mistake to assume, without qualification, that the motivations of characters in a novel of another epoch must be the same as ours. Twenty-first century fashions and conventions cannot be imposed on other eras without distortion. Historical sensitivity is required.

Does this surrender to the relativist? Maybe we are so imprisoned by the thought processes of our own religion or era that we can never shake them off. That would have to be so, if there was no common ground underpinning all

¹³ T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 134

¹⁴ See R. Trigg, *Reason and Commitment*, ch. 5

human eras and traditions. We would then always merely see our own reflection, once we study other cultures or historical periods. The question remains how we can understand other religious beliefs when they are seemingly very different from our own. One answer must be that ‘we’ cannot be defined so narrowly as to be confined to place and time. We are human. Our sharing of a common nature, itself a basic anti-relativist assumption, gives a platform on which to stand. Otherwise, history would be impossible, as would attempts, such as social anthropology, to compare human beings in different settings.

We think we can still understand the words of the empiricist philosopher, David Hume, written in the eighteenth century. He championed the idea that human nature remains the same across nations and ages. He said: ‘Would you know the sentiments, inclinations and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and the English’.¹⁵ We cannot be locked into the presuppositions of a particular age with its own conceptual scheme. The simple claim of the relativist is always that times change and that we must keep up with the times. To say that something is old-fashioned is to condemn it. Yet what marks one age or conceptual scheme from another? What defines them? How long do they last? Are the views of Foucault, published in the 1970s, now becoming incomprehensible to us, or can Nietzsche’s strictures on power be ignored because they were written in the century before last? The nineteenth-century Nietzsche must then surely now be beyond our understanding. With rapid technological change creating new forms of communication and of society, does that mean that old people could not remember how they used to think? We cannot shut off one age from another. If we do, we limit our understanding, together with our ability to stand back from ourselves and assess our present situation.

A secular society may, through ignorance or indifference, find it difficult to empathise with religious people, but that does not make it logically impossible. There are myriad matters of disagreement and possible misunderstanding even between individuals. If we wish to be in a society with absolutely settled, shared assumptions, in which there is no disagreement, we are liable to find ourselves very lonely. We all, as individuals, differ from each other in some way.

1.4 The One and the Many

Despite our differences, we share a common human nature, which provides an important basis for mutual understanding. There is much in modern evolutionary biology that supports this assumption. Human beings use inter-translatable languages to communicate the same basic needs and interests. We share the

¹⁵ *Enquiry*, ed. Selby-Bigge, p. 83

same biology, including common ways of perceiving the world. The mapping of the human genome in recent years has underlined the commonality that exists between all humans. Evolution may adapt humans to different ecological niches, but our common characteristics are rooted in our biological nature. The interaction of genes and environment can be subtle, but, as has often been said, the genes hold culture on a leash. They set limits that human cultures cross at their peril. As an extreme example, a culture (or religion), preaching youthful suicide or total celibacy, will not long survive.

Even so, the concept of human nature is questioned, and denied, in some quarters.¹⁶ That, though, makes the idea of human genome having any influence on human behaviour very questionable and challenges much of the basis of biology. Indeed any reference to humanity, as such, has to be proscribed. Even the idea of human rights, however much they are invoked, is exposed as at best an arbitrary social construction, and, at worst, an illusion. There cannot be any human rights in virtue of our common humanity, if there is no common humanity. This denial of human nature is part of the wider denial of any independent reality existing apart from our conceptions of it. Yet the success of human thought does not just presuppose a commonality between thinkers and their access to the world. It assumes that we will confront the same world. The question still remains how we can understand it, and to what extent our limitations as human beings limit our understanding.

A necessary presupposition of science, let alone all human thought and language, is that it investigates an independent reality. The world of science is not constructed but discovered. It is an indispensable presupposition of science that there is one physical world that exists in the same way in different places. There is not an American world, a British world or a Chinese world. The world is one. By that, modern science does not just mean our everyday world. Its reach stretches to the whole universe, or even, as some physicists would have it, to a multiplicity, even an infinity, of universes. Some scientists even envisage our universe as one of many different universes which operate according to different physical laws. The unity of science, and of its capabilities must then be in jeopardy, since human science could never access, let alone understand, such absolute physical diversity. This illustrates how what used to be called the uniformity of nature is a presupposition underlying our ability to do science and enable it to progress. We must assume that what is valid here is valid there, that which is demonstrated now will obtain then. We can extrapolate because of a confidence that physical reality, wherever it is found, will possess the same enduring characteristics.¹⁷

¹⁶ See R. Trigg, *Ideas of Human Nature*

¹⁷ For more on this see R. Trigg, *Beyond Matter: Why Science Needs Metaphysics?*