

From  
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of Religion  
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## The Dimensions of Religion

NINIAN SMART

In discussing religion most of us generalize from the one religion we happen to know best. The principal religions of the world, however, differ in important ways.

For an account of the main aspects of religion, we turn to the writing of Ninian Smart (1927–2001), who taught religious studies at the University of Lancaster and the University of California, Santa Barbara. In the selection that follows, he concludes that every religion contains doctrines, myths, ethical teachings, rituals, and social institutions, all of which are animated by various kinds of religious experiences.

He emphasizes that although religions resemble one another, each is unique and needs to be understood in its own terms. In other words, he stresses that we need to keep in mind the multiplicity of religious traditions while still recognizing their points of unity.

[E]ach religion has its own style, its own inner dynamic, its own special meanings, its uniqueness. Each religion is an organism, and has to be understood in terms of the interrelation of its different parts. Thus though there are resemblances between religions or between parts of religions, these must not be seen too crudely.

For example, it is correct to say that some religions are monotheistic. They each worship a single God. But the conception of God can vary subtly. For instance, though Islam and Christianity both draw upon the Old Testament heritage, and though Allah has many characteristics of the Christian God, such as being Creator, judge, merciful, providential, nevertheless even the points of resemblance are affected by the rest of the milieu. Thus the Christian idea of the Creator is affected by the fact that creation is not just seen in relation to Genesis but also in relation to the opening verses of John. Belief in Christ seen as the Logos affects belief in God and affects one's view of creation.

It is like a picture. A particular element, such as a patch of yellow, may occur in two different pictures. One can point to the resemblance. Yet the meaning of one patch of yellow can still be very different from the meaning of the other. What it means, how it looks—these depend on what other

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patches of color surround it. Likewise, elements in a religious organism are affected by the other elements present.

So although we are inevitably drawn to compare religions in order to make sense of the patterns of religious experience found in the history of men's faiths, we also have to recognize that each religion must also be seen essentially in its own terms, from within, as it were. This means that we have to have a sense of the multiplicity of man's religious life, as well as for its points of unity and contact. We are not only concerned with religion: we are concerned also with religions. And we have to see them in the perspective of the world's history.

[T]here are different aspects or, as I shall call them, *dimensions* of religion. . . .

### The Ritual Dimension

If we were asked the use or purpose of such buildings as temples and churches, we would not be far wrong in saying that they are used for ritual or ceremonial purposes. Religion tends in part to express itself through such rituals: through worship, prayers, offerings, and the like. We may call this the *ritual* dimension of religion. About this, some important comments need to be made.

First, when we think of ritual we often think of something very formal and elaborate, like a High Mass or the Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church. But it is worth remarking that even the simplest form of religious service involves ritual, in the sense of some form of outer behavior (such as closing one's eyes in prayer) coordinated to an inner intention to make contact with, or to participate in, the invisible world. I am not concerned here with those who deny the existence of such an "invisible world," however interpreted, whether as God's presence, as nirvana, as a sacred energy pervading nature. Whether or not such an invisible world exists, it forms an aspect of the world seen from the point of view of those who participate in religion. It is believed in. . . .

Second, since ritual involves both an inner and an outer aspect it is always possible that the latter will come to dominate the former. Ritual then degenerates into a mechanical or conventional process. If people go through the motions of religious observance without accompanying it with the intentions and sentiments which give it human meaning, ritual is merely an empty shell. This is the reason why some religious activities are condemned as "ritualistic." But it would be wrong to conclude that because ritualism in this bad sense exists, therefore ritual is an unimportant or degenerate aspect of religion.

It should not be forgotten that there are secular rituals which we all use, and these can form an integral part of personal and social relationships. Greeting someone with a "Good morning," saying goodbye, saluting the

flag—all these in differing ways are secular rituals. Very often in society they are integrated with religious rituals, as when men say "God be with you," which is more than taking leave of someone: it is invoking a blessing upon the other person.

Third, it will prove convenient to extend the meaning of "ritual" beyond its reference to the forms of worship, sacrifice, etc., directed toward God or the gods.

It happens that a crucial part is played in India and elsewhere by yoga and analogous techniques of self-training. The ultimate aim of such methods is the attainment of higher states of consciousness, through which the adept has experience of release from worldly existence, of nirvana, of ultimate reality (the interpretation partly depends on the system of doctrines against which the adept tests his experience). Thus the essence of such religion is contemplative or mystical. Sometimes, it is pursued without reference to God or the gods—for example, in Buddhism, where the rituals of a religion of worship and sacrifice are regarded as largely irrelevant to the pursuit of nirvana. Nevertheless, the techniques of self-training have an analogy to ritual: the adept performs various physical and mental exercises through which he hopes to concentrate the mind on the transcendent, invisible world, or to withdraw his senses from their usual immersion in the flow of empirical experiences. This aspect of religion, then, we shall include in our definition of the ritual dimension. It can be classified as pragmatic (aimed at the attainment of certain experiences) in distinction from sacred ritual (directed toward a holy being, such as God). Sometimes the two forms of ritual are combined, as in Christian mysticism.

The meaning of ritual cannot be understood without reference to the environment of belief in which it is performed. Thus prayer in most ritual is directed toward a divine being. Very often, legends about the gods are used to explain the features of a ceremony or festival, and often the important events of human life, such as birth, marriage, death, are invested with a sacred significance by relating them to the divine world.

All this can happen before a religion has any theology or formal system of doctrines. Theology is an attempt to introduce organization and intellectual power into what is found in less explicit form in the deposit of revelation or traditional mythology of a religion. The collection of myths, images, and stories through which the invisible world is symbolized can suitably be called the *mythological* dimension of religion.

### The Mythological Dimension

Some important comments need to be made about this mythological dimension. First, in accordance with modern usage in theology and in the comparative study of religion, the terms "myth," "mythological," etc., are not used to mean that the content is false. Perhaps in ordinary English to say

"It's a myth" is just a way of saying "It's false." But the use of the term *myth* in relation to religious phenomena is quite neutral as to the truth or falsity of the story enshrined in the myth. In origin, the term "myth" means "story," and in calling something a story we are not thereby saying that it is true or false. We are just reporting on what has been said. Similarly, here we are concerned with reporting on what is believed.

Second, it is convenient to use the term to include not merely stories about God (for instance the story of the creation in Genesis), about the gods (for instance in Homer's *Iliad*), etc., but also the historical events of religious significance in a tradition. For example, the Passover ritual in Judaism re-enacts a highly important event that once occurred to the children of Israel; their delivery from bondage in Egypt. The historical event functions as a myth. Thus we shall include stories relating to significant historical events under the head of the mythological dimension—again without prejudice to whether the stories accurately describe what actually occurred in history.

### The Doctrinal Dimension

Third, it is not always easy to differentiate the mythological and the symbolic from what is stated in theology. Doctrines are an attempt to give system, clarity, and intellectual power to what is revealed through the mythological and symbolic language of religious faith and ritual. Naturally, theology must make use of the symbols and myths. For example, when the Christian theologian has to describe the meaning of the Incarnation, he must necessarily make use of Biblical language and history. Thus the dividing line between the mythological and what I shall call the *doctrinal* dimension is not easy to draw. Yet there is clearly a distinction between Aquinas's treatment of creation at the philosophical level and the colorful story of creation in Genesis. The distinction is important, because the world religions owe some of their living power to their success in presenting a total picture of reality, through a coherent system of doctrines.

### The Ethical Dimension

Throughout history we find that religions usually incorporate a code of ethics. Ethics concern the behavior of the individual and, to some extent, the code of ethics of the dominant religion controls the community. Quite obviously, men do not always live up to the standards they profess. And sometimes the standards which are inculcated by the dominant faith in a particular society may not be believed by all sections of that society.

Even so, there is no doubt that religions have been influential in molding the ethical attitudes of the societies they are part of. It is important, however, to distinguish between the moral teaching incorporated in the doctrines and

mythology of a religion, and the social facts concerning those who adhere to the faith in question. For instance, Christianity teaches "Love thy neighbor as thyself." As a matter of sociological fact, quite a lot of people in so-called Christian countries, where Christianity is the official, or dominant religion, fail to come anywhere near this ideal. The man who goes to church is not necessarily loving; nor is the man who goes to a Buddhist temple necessarily compassionate. Consequently, we must distinguish between the ethical teachings of a faith, which we shall discuss as the *ethical* dimension of religion, and the actual sociological effects and circumstances of a religion.

Pertinent to this point is the consideration that most religions are institutionalized. This is most obvious in technologically primitive societies, where the priest, soothsayer, or magician is closely integrated into the social structure. Religion is not just a personal matter here: it is part of the life of the community. It is built into the institutions of daily life. But even in sophisticated communities where a line is drawn between religious and secular concerns, as in contemporary America, churches exist as institutions to be reckoned with. They are part of the "establishment." In areas where there is active or latent persecution of religious faith, as in the Soviet Union, there are still organizations for continuing religious activities.

### The Social Dimension

Religions are not just systems of *belief*: they are also organizations, or parts of organizations. They have a communal and social significance. This social shape of a religion is, of course, to some extent determined by the religious and ethical ideals and practices that it harbors. Conversely, it often happens that the religious and ethical ideals are adapted to existing social conditions and attitudes. For example, Japanese fishermen reconcile the Buddhist injunction against taking life (even animal or fish life) to their activity as fishermen. The Christian's dedication to brotherly love or his attitude to war may be determined more by patriotism and a national crisis than by the Gospel. Thus, it is important to distinguish between the ethical dimension of religion and the *social* dimension. The latter is the mode in which the religion in question is institutionalized, whereby, through its institutions and teachings, it affects the community in which it finds itself. The doctrinal, mythological, and ethical dimensions express a religion's claims about the nature of the invisible world and its aims about how men's lives ought to be shaped: the social dimension indicates the way in which men's lives are in fact shaped by these claims and the way in which religious institutions operate.

It is, incidentally, clear that the ongoing patterns of ritual are an important element in the institutionalization of religion. For example, if it is believed that certain ceremonies and sacraments can only be properly performed by a priest, then the religious institution will be partly determined by the need to maintain and protect a professional priesthood.

## The Experiential Dimension

The dimensions we have so far discussed would indeed be hard to account for were it not for the dimension . . . of experience, the *experiential* dimension. Although men may hope to have contact with, and participate in, the invisible world through ritual, personal religion normally involves the hope of, or realization of, experience of that world. The Buddhist monk hopes for nirvana, and this includes the contemplative experience of peace and of insight into the transcendent. The Christian who prays to God believes normally that God answers prayer—and this not just “externally” in bringing about certain states of affairs, such as a cure for illness, but more importantly “internally” in the personal relationship that flows between the man who prays and his Maker. The prayerful Christian believes that God does speak to men in an intimate way and that the individual can and does have an inner experience of God. Hence, personal religion necessarily involves what we have called the experiential dimension.

The factor of religious experience is even more crucial when we consider the events and the human lives from which the great religions have stemmed. The Buddha achieved Enlightenment as he sat in meditation beneath the Bo-Tree. As a consequence of his shattering mystical experience, he believed that he had the secret of the cure for the suffering and dissatisfactions of life in this world. We have records of the inaugural visions of some of the Old Testament prophets, of the experiences that told them something profoundly important about God and that spurred them on to teach men in his name. It was through such experiences that Mohammad began to preach the unity of Allah—a preaching that had an explosive impact upon the world from Central Asia to Spain. One cannot read the Upanishads, the source of so much of Hindu doctrine, without feeling the experience on which their teachings are founded. The most striking passage in the *Bhagavadgita*, perhaps the greatest religious document of Hinduism, is that in which the Lord reveals himself in terrifying splendor to Arjuna. Arjuna is overwhelmed by awe and filled with utter devotion. . . .

The words of Jesus Christ reveal his sense of intimate closeness to the Father; there is little doubt that this rested upon highly significant personal experiences. These and other examples can be given of the crucial part played by religious experience in the genesis of the great faiths. . . .

There is a special difficulty, however, in undertaking a description of a religious experience. We have to rely upon the testimony of those who have the experience, and their reports must be conveyed to us either by telling or writing. Sometimes accounts of prophetic or mystical experience of important religious leaders have been preserved by oral tradition through many generations before being written down. But for the most part, the individual religious experiences that have influenced large segments of mankind occurred in cultures that knew the art of writing.

This means that the experience occurred in the context of the existing religions which already had a doctrinal dimension. This raises a problem for us in our attempt to understand the unique religious experience of the prophets or founders of religions, for their experiences are likely to be interpreted in the light of existing doctrines, as well as clothed in the mythological and symbolic forms of the age. There is less difficulty when we consider the “lesser” figures of the religions—not the founders, but those saints and visionaries who come after. They interpret their experiences in terms of received doctrines and mythologies.

For these reasons, it is not easy to know about a given report which of the elements in it are based, so to say, purely on the experience itself, and which are due to doctrinal and mythological interpretation. To some extent the problem can be overcome by comparing the reports of men of different cultures—such as India and the West—which had virtually no contact during the periods crucial for the formation and elaboration of the dominant religious beliefs.

Moreover, it is worth noting that there is a *dialectic* between experience and doctrine. Thus, though the Buddha, for example, took over elements from the thought-forms of his own age, he was genuinely a creative teacher, who introduced new elements and transmuted the old. The Old Testament prophets fashioned a genuinely original ethical monotheism from an ex-istant belief in Yahweh. The changes they made in the simple tribal religious teaching they inherited can be understood, to some degree, in terms of the impact of the personal religious experiences that were revelatory for these men. Thus experience and doctrinal interpretation have a dialectical relationship. The latter colors the former, but the former also shapes the latter. . . .

This dialectical interplay also helps us to understand some of the features of personal religion at a humbler level. The Christian, for example, is taught certain doctrines and mythological symbols by his parents. He learns to call God “Our Father”; he is instructed to believe that the world is created by God and sustained by God. These ideas will at first simply be “theoretical” as far as the young Christian is concerned, on a par with other non-observable theories he learns about the world, such as that the earth goes round the sun. But suppose he progresses to a deeper understanding of the Christian faith through a particular personal experience, or through his response to the ritual and ethical demands of the religion. Then he will come to see that in some mysterious way God is a person with whom he can have contact; God is not just like the sun, to be thought of speculatively, or to be looked at. Personally, then, he discovers that he can worship and pray to God. In short, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth” will come to have a new meaning for him. In a sense, he will now believe something other than what he first believed. In this way, the interplay between doctrine and experiences is fundamental to personal religion. . . .

## Religion as an Organism

To sum up our account . . . of what religion is: it is a six-dimensional organism, typically containing doctrines, myths, ethical teachings, rituals, and social institutions, and animated by religious experiences of various kinds. To understand the key ideas of religion, such as God and nirvana, one has to understand the pattern of religious life directed toward these goals. God is the focus of worship and praise; nirvana is found by treading the Noble Eightfold Path, culminating in contemplation. . . .

## Religious Pluralism and Salvation

JOHN H. HICK

John H. Hick, whose work we read previously, believes that despite the differences among religions, in at least one crucial respect all are fundamentally similar. Each can be viewed as offering a path to salvation, a way of shifting believers from self-centeredness to concentration on a divine reality. In light of this consideration, Hick urges all religious adherents to reject the view that their own religions are superior to all others.

In particular, Hick maintains that Christians should recognize the "arbitrary and contrived notion" that the salvation of all persons depends on their believing in the Trinity and resurrection. Whether such a doctrinal transformation would undermine or enhance Christianity is a crucial question for readers to consider.

The fact that there is a plurality of religious traditions, each with its own distinctive beliefs, spiritual practices, ethical outlook, art forms, and cultural ethos, creates an obvious problem for those of us who see them, not simply as human phenomena, but as responses to the Divine. For each presents itself,

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implicitly or explicitly, as in some important sense absolute and unsurpassable and as rightly claiming a total allegiance. The problem of the relationship between these different streams of religious life has often been posed in terms of their divergent belief-systems. For whilst there are various overlaps between their teachings there are also radical differences: is the divine reality (let us refer to it as the Real) personal or non-personal; if personal, is it unitary or triune; is the universe created, or emanated, or itself eternal; do we live only once on this earth or are we repeatedly reborn? and so on and so on. When the problem of understanding religious plurality is approached through these rival truth-claims it appears particularly intractable.

I want to suggest, however, that it may more profitably be approached from a different direction, in terms of the claims of the various traditions to provide, or to be effective contexts of, salvation. "Salvation" is primarily a Christian term, though I shall use it here to include its functional analogues in the other major world traditions. In this broader sense we can say that both Christianity and these other faiths are paths of salvation. For whereas preaxial religion was (and is) centrally concerned to keep life going on an even keel, the post-axial traditions, originating or rooted in the "axial age" of the first millennium B.C.E.—principally Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam—are centrally concerned with a radical transformation of the human situation.

It is of course possible, in an alternative approach, to define salvation in such a way that it becomes a necessary truth that only one particular tradition can provide it. If, for example, from within Christianity we define salvation as being forgiven by God because of Jesus' atoning death, and so becoming part of God's redeemed community, the church, then salvation is by definition Christian salvation. If on the other hand, from within Mahayana Buddhism, we define it as the attainment of *satori* or awakening, and so becoming an ego-free manifestation of the eternal Dharmakaya, then salvation is by definition Buddhist liberation. And so on. But if we stand back from these different conceptions to compare them, we can, I think, very naturally and properly see them as different forms of the more fundamental conception of a radical change from a profoundly unsatisfactory state to one that is limitlessly better because rightly related to the Real. Each tradition conceptualizes in its own way the wrongness of ordinary human existence—as a state of fallenness from paradisaical virtue and happiness, or as a condition of moral weakness and alienation from God, or as the fragmentation of the infinite One into false individualities, or as a self-centeredness which pervasively poisons our involvement in the world process, making it to us an experience of anxious, unhappy unfulfillment. But each at the same time proclaims a limitlessly better possibility, again conceptualized in different ways—as the joy of conforming one's life to God's law; as giving oneself to God in Christ, so that "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20), leading to eternal life in God's presence; as a complete surrender (*islam*) to God, and hence peace with God, leading to the bliss of paradise; as transcending the

one has acknowledged the salvific efficacy of the various great spiritual ways, is the arbitrary and contrived notion of their metaphysical dependency upon the death of Christ. But the theologian who undertakes to spell out this invisible causality is not to be envied. The problem is not one of logical possibility—it only requires logical agility to cope with that—but one of religious or spiritual plausibility. It would be a better use of theological time and energy, in my opinion, to develop forms of trinitarian, christological, and soteriological doctrine which are compatible with our awareness of the independent salvific authenticity of the other great world faiths. Such forms are already available in principle in conceptions of the Trinity, not as ontologically three but as three ways in which the one God is humanly thought and experienced; conceptions of Christ as a man so fully open to and inspired by God as to be, in the ancient Hebrew metaphor, a “son of God”; and conceptions of salvation as an actual human transformation which has been powerfully elicited and shaped, among his disciples, by the influence of Jesus.

There may indeed well be a variety of ways in which Christian thought can develop in response to our acute late twentieth century awareness of the other world religions, as there were of responding to the nineteenth century awareness of the evolution of the forms of life and the historical character of the holy scriptures. And likewise there will no doubt be a variety of ways in which each of the other great traditions can rethink its inherited assumption of its own unique superiority. But it is not for us to tell people of other traditions how to do their own business. Rather, we should attend to our own.

## A Defense of Religious Exclusionism

ALVIN PLANTINGA

In response to those like John Hick who urge religious adherents to reject the superiority of their own religion, Alvin Plantinga, whose work we read previously, maintains that his belief in Christianity is true, whereas beliefs incompatible with Christianity are false. Is he, therefore, intellectually mistaken or morally arrogant? He denies these charges. Assessing his defense is the responsibility of each reader.

I find myself with religious beliefs . . . that I realize aren't shared by nearly everyone else. For example, I believe both

- (1) The world was created by God, an almighty, all-knowing, and perfectly good personal being (one that holds beliefs, has aims, plans, and intentions); and can act to accomplish these aims).
- (2) Human beings require salvation, and God has provided a unique way of salvation through the incarnation, life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of his divine son.

Now there are many who do not believe these things. First, there are those who agree with me on (1) but not (2): They are non-Christian theistic religions. Second, there are those who don't accept either (1) or (2) but nonetheless do believe that there is something beyond the natural world, a something such that human well-being and salvation depend upon standing in a right relation to it. Third, in the West and since the Enlightenment, anyway, there are people—*naturalists*, we may call them—who don't believe any of these three things. And my problem is this: When I become really aware of these other ways of looking at the world, these other ways of responding religiously to the world, what must or should I do? What is the right sort of attitude to take? What sort of impact should this awareness have on the beliefs I hold and the strength with which I hold them? My question is this: How should I think about the great religious diversity the world in fact displays? Can I sensibly remain an adherent of just one of these religions, rejecting the others? And here I am thinking specifically of *beliefs*. Of course, there is a great deal more to any religion or religious practice than just belief, and I don't for a moment mean to deny it. But belief is a crucially important part of most religions; it is a crucially important part of *my* religion; and the question I mean to ask here is, What does the awareness of religious diversity mean or should mean for my religious beliefs? . . .

Now there are several possible reactions to awareness of religious diversity. One is to continue to believe—what you have all along believed; you learn about this diversity but continue to believe that is, take to be true—such propositions as (1) and (2) above, consequently taking to be false any beliefs, religious or otherwise, that are incompatible with (1) and (2). Following current practice, I will call this *exclusionism*; the exclusionist holds that the tenets or some of the tenets of *one* religion—Christianity, let's say—are in fact true; he adds, naturally enough, that any propositions, including other religious beliefs, that are incompatible with those tenets are false. And there is a fairly widespread apprehension that . . . exclusionism as such is or involves a vice of some sort: It is wrong or deplorable. It is this claim I want to examine. I propose to argue that exclusionism need not involve either epistemic or moral failure and that, furthermore, something like it is wholly unavoidable, given our human condition.

These objections, of course, are not to the *truth* of (1) or (2) or any other proposition someone might accept in this exclusionist way (although objections of

that sort are also put forward): they are instead directed to the *propriety* or *rightness* of exclusivism. There are initially two different kinds of indictments of exclusivism: broadly moral, or ethical, indictments and other broadly intellectual, or epistemic, indictments. These overlap in interesting ways as we will see below. But initially, anyway, we can take some of the complaints about exclusivism as *intellectual* criticisms: It is *irrational* or *unjustified* to think in an exclusivist way. The other large body of complaint is moral: There is something *morally* suspect about exclusivism—it is arbitrary, or intellectually arrogant, or imperialistic. . . . I want to consider both kinds of claims or criticisms; I propose to argue that the exclusivist as such is not necessarily guilty of any of these charges.

I turn to the moral complaints: that the exclusivist is intellectually arrogant, or egotistical or self-servingly arbitrary, or dishonest, or imperialistic, or oppressive. But first, I provide three qualifications. An exclusivist, like anyone else, will probably be guilty of some or of all of these things to at least some degree, perhaps particularly the first two. The question, however, is whether she is guilty of these things just by virtue of being an exclusivist. Second, I will use the term *exclusivism* in such a way that you don't count as an exclusivist unless you are rather fully aware of other faiths, have had their existence and their claims called to your attention with some force and perhaps fairly frequently, and have to some degree reflected on the problem of pluralism, asking yourself such questions as whether it is or could be really true that the Lord has revealed Himself and His programs to us Christians, say, in a way in which He hasn't revealed Himself to those of other faiths. Thus, my grandmother, for example, would not have counted as an exclusivist. She had, of course, *heard* of the heathen, as she called them, but the idea that perhaps Christians could learn from them, and learn from them with respect to religious matters, had not so much as entered her head; and the fact that it *hadn't* entered her head, I take it, was not a matter of moral dereliction on her part. This same would go for a Buddhist or Hindu peasant. These people are not, I think, properly charged with arrogance or other moral flaws in believing as they do.

Third . . . an exclusivist, as I use the term, not only believes something like (1) or (2) and thinks false any proposition incompatible with it; she also meets a further condition C that . . . includes (a) being rather fully aware of other religions, (b) knowing that there is much that at the least looks like genuine piety and devoutness in them, and (c) believing that you know of no arguments that would necessarily convince all or most honest and intelligent dissenters.

Given these qualifications then, why should we think that an exclusivist is properly charged with these moral faults? I will deal first and most briefly with charges of oppression and imperialism: I think we must say that they are on the face of it wholly implausible. I daresay there are some among you who reject some of the things I believe; I do not believe that you are thereby oppressing me, even if you do not believe you have an argument that would

convince me. It is conceivable that exclusivism might in some way *contribute* to oppression, but it isn't in itself oppressive.

The more important moral charge is that there is a sort of self-serving arbitrariness, an arrogance or egotism, in accepting such propositions as (1) or (2) under condition C; exclusivism is guilty of some serious moral fault or flaw. According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, ". . . except at the cost of insensitivity or delinquency, it is morally not possible actually to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent, fellow human beings: '. . . we believe that we know God and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong.'"<sup>1</sup>

So what can the exclusivist have to say for himself. Well, it must be conceded immediately that if he believes (1) or (2), then he must also believe that those who believe something incompatible with them are mistaken and believe what is false. That's no more than simple logic. Furthermore, he must also believe that those who do not believe as he does—those who believe neither (1) nor (2), whether or not they believe their negations—*fail* to believe something that is deep and important and that he *does* believe. He must therefore see himself as *privileged* with respect to those others—those others of both kinds. There is something of great value, he must think, that *he* has and *they* lack. They are ignorant of something—something of great importance—of which he has knowledge. But does this make him properly subject to the above censure?

I think the answer must be no. Or if the answer is yes, then I think we have here a genuine moral dilemma; for in our earthly life here below, as my Sunday School teacher used to say, there is no real alternative; there is no reflective attitude that is not open to the same strictures. These charges of arrogance are a philosophical tar baby: Get close enough to them to use them against the exclusivist and you are likely to find them stuck fast to yourself. How so? Well, as an exclusivist, I realize that I can't convince others that they should believe as I do, but I nonetheless continue to believe as I do. The charge is that I am, as a result, arrogant or egotistical, arbitrarily preferring my way of doing things to other ways.<sup>2</sup> But what are my alternatives with respect to a proposition like (1)? There seem to be three choices. I can continue to hold it; I can withhold it . . . believing neither it nor its denial, and I can accept its denial. Consider the third way, a way taken by those pluralists who, like John Hick, hold that such propositions as (1) and (2) and their colleagues from other faiths are literally false, although in some way still valid responses to the Real. This seems to me to be no advance at all with respect to the arrogance or egotism problem; this is not a way out. For if I do this, I will then be in the very same condition as I am now: I will believe many propositions others don't believe and will be in condition C with respect to those propositions. For I will then believe the denials of (1) and (2) (as well as the denials of many other propositions explicitly accepted by those of other faiths). Many others, of course, do not believe the denials of (1) and (2) and in fact believe (1) and (2). Further, I will not know of any arguments that can be

counted on to persuade those who do believe (1) or (2) (or propositions accepted by the adherents of other religions). I am therefore in the condition of believing propositions that many others do not believe and furthermore am in condition C. If, in the case of those who believe (1) and (2), that is sufficient for intellectual arrogance or egotism, the same goes for those who believe their denials.

So consider the second option: I can instead *withhold* the proposition in question. I can say to myself: "The right course here, given that I can't or couldn't convince these others of what I believe, is to believe neither these propositions nor their denials." The pluralist objector to exclusivism can say that the right course, under condition C, is to abstain from believing the offending proposition and also abstain from believing its denial; call him, therefore, "the abstemious pluralist." But does he thus really avoid the condition that, on the part of the exclusivist, leads to the charges of egotism and arrogance in this way? Think for a moment, about disagreement: Disagreement, fundamentally, is a matter of adopting conflicting propositional attitudes with respect to a given proposition. In the simplest and most familiar case, I disagree with you if there is some proposition *p* such that I believe *p* and you believe  $\neg p$ . But that's just the simplest case; there are also others. The one that is presently of interest is this: I believe *p* and you withhold it, fail to believe it. Call the first kind of disagreement "contradicting"; call the second "dissenting."

My claim is that if contradicting others (under the condition C spelled out above) is arrogant and egotistical, so is dissenting (under that same condition). Suppose you believe some proposition *p* but I don't; perhaps you believe that it is wrong to discriminate against people simply on the grounds of race, but I, recognizing that there are many people who disagree with you, do not believe this proposition. I don't disbelieve it either, of course, but in the circumstances I think the right thing to do is to abstain from belief. Then am I not implicitly condemning your attitude, your *believing* the proposition, as somehow improper—naïve, perhaps, or unjustified, or in some other way less than optimal? I am implicitly saying that my attitude is the superior one; I think my course of action here is the right one and yours somehow wrong, inadequate, improper, in the circumstances at best second-rate. Of course, I realize that there is no question, here, of *showing* you that your attitude is wrong or improper or naïve; so am I not guilty of intellectual arrogance? Of a sort of egotism, thinking I know better than you, arrogating to myself a privileged status with respect to you? The problem for the exclusivist was that she was obliged to think she possessed a truth missed by many others; the problem for the abstemious pluralist is that he is obliged to think that he possesses a virtue others don't or acts rightly where others don't. If, in condition C, one is arrogant by way of believing a proposition others don't, isn't one equally, under those reflective conditions, arrogant by way of withholding a proposition others don't? . . .

So the abstemious pluralist is hoist with his own petard; but even apart from this dialectical argument (which in any event some will think unduly

cute), aren't the charges unconvincing and implausible? I must concede that there are a variety of ways in which I can be and have been intellectually arrogant and egotistic; I have certainly fallen into this vice in the past and no doubt am not free of it now. But am I really arrogant and egotistic just by virtue of believing what I know others don't believe, where I can't show them that I am right? Suppose I think the matter over, consider the objections as carefully as I can, realize that I am finite and furthermore a sinner, certainly no better than those with whom I disagree; but suppose it still seems clear to me that the proposition in question is true. Can I really be behaving immorally in continuing to believe it? I am dead sure that it is wrong to try to advance my career by telling lies about my colleagues; I realize there are those who disagree; I also realize that in all likelihood there is no way I can find to show them that they are wrong; nonetheless I think they are wrong. If I think this after careful reflection, if I consider the claims of those who disagree as sympathetically as I can, if I try my level best to ascertain the truth here, and it *still* seems to me sleazy, wrong, and despicable to lie about my colleagues to advance my career, could I really be doing what is immoral by continuing to believe as before? I can't see how. If, after careful reflection and thought, you find yourself convinced that the right propositional attitude to take to (1) and (2) in the face of the facts of religious pluralism is abstention from belief, how could you properly be taxed with egotism, either for so believing or for so abstaining? Even if you knew others did not agree with you? . . .

Return to the case of moral belief. King David took Bathsheba, made her pregnant, and then, after the failure of various stratagems to get her husband Uriah to think the baby was his, arranged for him to be killed. The prophet Nathan came to David and told him a story about a rich man and a poor man. The rich man had many flocks and herds; the poor man had only a single ewe lamb, which grew up with his children, "ate at his table, drank from his cup, lay in his bosom, and was like a daughter to him." The rich man had unexpected guests. Rather than slaughter one of his own sheep, he took the poor man's single ewe lamb, slaughtered it, and served it to his guests. David exploded in anger: "The man who did this deserves to die!" Then, in one of the most riveting passages in all the Bible, Nathan turns to David and declares, "You are that man!" And then David sees what he has done.

My interest here is in David's reaction to the story. I agree with David: Such injustice is utterly and despicably wrong; there are really no words for it. I believe that such an action is wrong; and I believe that the proposition that it *isn't* wrong—either because really *nothing* is wrong, or because even if some things are wrong, *this* isn't—is false. As a matter of fact, there isn't a lot I believe more strongly. I recognize, however, that there are those who disagree with me; and once more, I doubt that I could find an argument to show them that I am right and they wrong. Further, for all I know, their conflicting beliefs have for them the same internally available epistemic markers, the same phenomenology, as mine have for me. Am I then being arbitrary, treating similar cases differently in continuing to hold, as I do, that in fact that



kind of behavior is dreadfully wrong? I don't think so. Am I wrong in thinking racial bigotry despicable, even though I know that there are others who disagree, and even if I think they have the same internal markers for their beliefs as I have for mine? I don't think so. I believe in serious actualism, the view that no objects have properties in worlds in which they do not exist, not even nonexistence. Others do not believe this, and perhaps the internal markers of their dissenting views have for them the same quality as my views have for me. Am I being arbitrary in continuing to think as I do? I can't see how.

And the reason here is this: in each of these cases, the believer in question doesn't really think the beliefs in question *are* on a relevant epistemic par. She may agree that she and those who dissent are equally convinced of the truth of their belief and even that they are internally on a par, that the internally available markers are similar, or relevantly similar. But she must still think that there is an important epistemic difference, she thinks that somehow the other person has *made a mistake*, or *has a blind spot*, or hasn't been wholly attentive, or hasn't received some grace she has, or is in some way epistemically less fortunate. And, of course, the pluralist critic is in no better case. He thinks the thing to do when there is internal epistemic parity is to withhold judgment; he knows that there are others who don't think so, and for all he knows that belief has internal parity with his; if he continues in that belief, therefore, he will be in the same condition as the exclusivist; and if he doesn't continue in this belief, he no longer has an objection to the exclusivist.

But couldn't I be wrong? Of course I could! But I don't avoid that risk by withholding all religious (or philosophical or moral) beliefs; I can go wrong that way as well as any other, treating all religions, or all philosophical thoughts, or all moral views as on a par. Again, there is no safe haven here, no way to avoid risk. In particular you won't reach a safe haven by trying to take the same attitude toward all the historically available patterns of belief and withholding; for in so doing, you adopt a particular pattern of belief and withholding, one incompatible with some adopted by others. "You pays your money and you takes your choice," realizing that you, like anyone else, can be desperately wrong. But what else can you do? You don't really have an alternative. And how can you do better than believe and withhold according to what, after serious and responsible consideration, seems to you to be the right pattern of belief and withholding?

NOTES

1. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Religious Diversity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 14.
2. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), p. 2.

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