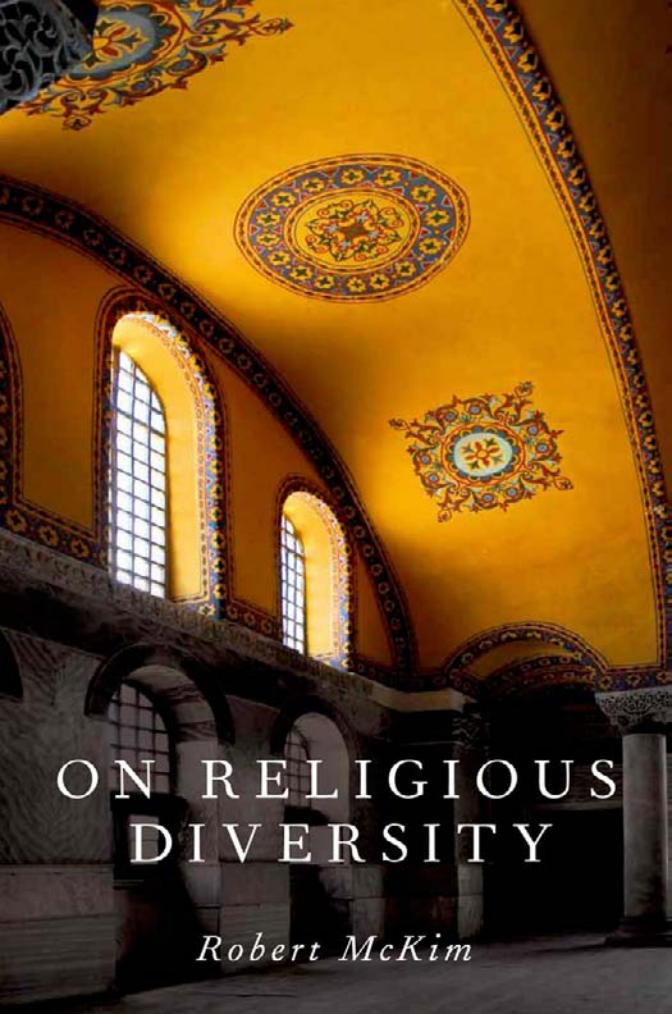
ON RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY
Robert McKim

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ROBERT McKIM

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To:

Mrs. Laing
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Professor Terence Penelhum
Professor Gene Outka

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PREFACE

I am indebted to many colleagues, friends, and students for discussion of the themes pursued in this book. Special thanks to Michael Scoville and to Blair Goodlin for numerous excellent comments on most of the chapters and to Michael Mrozinski for many helpful observations on the chapters he read.

Earlier versions of parts of what follows have already appeared in print. An earlier version of part of chapter 6 appeared in "Could God have more than one nature?" *Faith and Philosophy* 5: 378–398, 1988, and a modified version of that material is used here by permission of the editor. An earlier version of another part of chapter 6 appeared in "The Goodness of the Real" *Sophia* 42: 172–78, 2003, and a modified version of that material is used here by permission of the publisher. Chapter 7 is a revised version of "On Religious Ambiguity" *Religious Studies* 44: 373–392, 2008, and appears here by permission of the editor. An early version of parts of chapters 2 to 6 appeared in Martin Cogan and John Littleton, eds., *Theology for Today, Vol. 1: Christianity and World Religions* (Dublin, Ireland: The Priory Institute, 2007), and a modified and expanded version of that material is used here by permission of the Director of The Priory Institute. I am very grateful for permission to use this material.

I am dedicating this book to some of my former teachers, having been the fortunate beneficiary of excellent instruction at a number of institutions from primary school to graduate school, and I list these former teachers in the chronological order in which I had the benefit of learning from them. I thank my teachers for the rigor of their pedagogy, for opening up new bodies of knowledge and new fields of inquiry, for capturing the attention and the imagination of their charges, for knowing when to provide a word of encouragement or a word of correction, and especially for exemplifying a love of learning and an appreciation of books and of ideas.

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1

On Responding to Other Religious Traditions

Introduction

Some years ago, I read the following in an obituary for the late American rabbi Mark Tannenbaum, who was greatly admired for his efforts to promote dialogue between Christians and Jews:

> [Before the Christian evangelist Billy] Graham held a crusade in Central Park last summer, Rabbi Tannenbaum set up a meeting between the Christian evangelist and the New York Board of Rabbis to assure the rabbis that Mr. Graham was not interested in converting Jews but only in bringing Christians to their faith. (*New York Times*, Saturday, July 4, 1992)

The point was to illustrate the importance of Rabbi Tannenbaum's contributions to promoting mutual understanding. But the episode has a larger significance.

It is conceivable, I suppose, that when Billy Graham indicated that he was not interested in converting Jews but only in bringing Christians to their faith, he just meant that salvation is not his to bestow, that all *he* could do is preach the gospel. And whether someone is converted to Christianity is up to God and not up to him. *He* could not bring it about that any non-Christian, Jewish or other, is converted to Christianity, no matter how hard he tried. Believing that this is not in his power, he could—maybe, at a stretch—say truthfully that he was not interested in accomplishing it. But I doubt that this is the explanation of this episode. In that case, the conversation with the rabbis would have been conducted in bad faith. What the rabbis presumably wished to hear, presumably thought they were hearing, and appear to have been led to believe is that Billy Graham was not going to take steps that would encourage the conversion of Jews to Christianity.

A more plausible interpretation is that Rev. Graham was proposing something like a division of the turf so that his message to the rabbis was along these lines: "I'll talk to my coreligionists, and you talk to yours. I'll try to help Christians be better Christians, but I won't try to persuade Jews to become Christians. I'll leave it to Jewish leaders to provide guidance to the Jewish community." If this division-of-the-turf interpretation is correct, or partly correct, it raises important questions. Billy Graham has devoted his life to spreading the Christian gospel throughout the world, and his efforts have met with considerable success.[1] Had he come to the conclusion that being a Christian is not necessary for salvation? If so, what *is* necessary? If Jews can achieve salvation while remaining Jews, what about Muslims who remain Muslim, Hindus who remain Hindu, and so on? What about morally impressive atheists? What about morally average atheists?

If, on the occasion of his conversation with the rabbis, Graham believed that it *is* necessary to be a Christian to achieve salvation, why would he forgo an opportunity to encourage the conversion of Jews to Christianity? If he understood that hearing and endorsing the message he was preaching is necessary to avoid eternal damnation, then surely his first priority ought to be to persuade as many people as possible of its truth. Was he, on this occasion and out of respect for the late rabbi, valuing the promotion of good community relations over the salvation of souls and over spreading the truth as he understood it?

This meeting between Billy Graham and the rabbis occurred in 1991, the year before Rabbi Tannenbaum's death. We know from other sources that during part of the 1980s, at any rate, Rev. Graham believed that being a Christian is necessary for salvation.[2] But Graham has softened his position somewhat. Jon Meacham recently described Graham as a "contradictory and controversial" figure who "increasingly thinks God's ways and means are veiled from human eyes and wrapped in mystery" (Jon Meacham, "Pilgrim's Progress," *Newsweek*, August 13, 2006). Meacham writes as follows:

> A unifying theme of Graham's new thinking is humility. He is sure and certain of his faith in Jesus as the way to salvation. When asked

1. Jon Meacham says that Billy Graham "has preached the Gospel to more human beings than anyone in history" ("Pilgrim's Progress," *Newsweek*, August 13, 2006; www.newsweek.com/2006/08/13/pilgrim-s-progress.html). Mark Noll says that in his public meetings alone, and quite apart from his influence through books and television, Billy Graham has spoken to more people than any other figure in Protestant history (*The Work We Have to Do: A History of Protestants in America* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 5).

2. "[Graham] was once called from the White House during a debate between then Vice-President Bush senior and his son over whether those who had not accepted Jesus as their saviour could go to Heaven. George W. thought this unthinkable; Graham ruled him correct" (Ed Vulliamy, "The President Rides Out," *Observer* (UK), Sunday, January 26, 2003).

> whether he believes heaven will be closed to good Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or secular people, though, Graham says: "Those are decisions only the Lord will make. It would be foolish for me to speculate on who will be there and who won't. . . . I don't want to speculate about all that. I believe the love of God is absolute. He said he gave his son for the whole world, and I think he loves everybody regardless of what label they have." . . . [In] Graham's view, only God knows who is going to be saved: "As an evangelist for more than six decades, Mr. Graham has faithfully proclaimed the Bible's Gospel message that Jesus is the only way to Heaven," says Graham spokesman A. Larry Ross. "However, salvation is the work of Almighty God, and only he knows what is in each human heart."

What we are observing in Graham's case, I suspect, is the development of a measure of uncertainty and flexibility, and a shift in the direction of forgoing comment on others, in response to a genuine perplexity. The shift in the direction of forgoing comment on others, in particular—a theme I will revisit at some length—may partly account for the openness that Dr. Graham exhibited in the meeting reported in the Tannenbaum obituary.

The perplexity in question is one that is unlikely to disappear. The religions of the world provide a challenge to each other that can, and should, puzzle and perplex their adherents. To be sure, the religions have long been aware of each other when, for example, they have competed for converts, or when they have contributed to the competition for empires. In many countries today, the traditions cooperate in various ways. They are all, to some extent, trying to cope with the modern world and with the challenge of secular alternatives to religion. And the attempt to cope in this as in other contexts can make for surprising bedfellows.

Nevertheless, it is difficult for the major religions to treat each other with adequate seriousness. (Later, I will have a good deal to say about what this would involve.) And this is so for reasons that are understandable, including the fact that the religions contribute to the cohesion of communities and provide various sorts of psychological support, including comfort for the bereaved and afflicted. If the religions take each other seriously, and especially if they take each other seriously on matters of belief, various adjustments in doctrine and in practice probably will occur. A certain amount of self-scrutiny, including scrutiny of their own views and practices, will probably also occur. And it is, or at least it may seem, more difficult for the traditions to fulfill their important social and psychological functions if they subject themselves to scrutiny and become open to making adjustments in light of the presence of others. Hence it would be risky for them to do anything other than continue with business as usual. Or so it may seem to them. Their adherents may sense that to take other traditions seriously

would compromise the ability of their tradition to fulfill social and psychological functions that intuitively they know to be crucial. Or they may find the process of taking others seriously threatening in some other way.

Yet the traditions will increasingly have to confront the significance of diversity. There is no escaping the fact that the presence of competing traditions now confronts each of the traditions in a new and more forceful way. For one thing, in many circles there is a widespread if inchoate recognition of genuine religious sensibilities in others and of a genuine religious seriousness among others that looks familiar to those who themselves possess such sensibilities. Actually, this recognition sometimes exerts a subtle pressure without even being explicitly acknowledged. (Maybe the case of Billy Graham and the rabbis, and indeed the evolution that Rev. Graham seems to have undergone in his thinking, exemplifies this pressure at work.) Perhaps it will become increasingly difficult to escape the fact that reflection about religious matters now has to be engaged in with an appreciation of the diversity of the world's religions, and with reflection about the significance of this diversity. Each tradition, in that case, will have to navigate its way through these waters. Indeed, I am confident that the issues raised in this book will be very pressing throughout the century we have just begun. They have to do with how we are to think of other religious groups, given that we have a lot more to do with each other.

So we might think of everything I say in what follows as reflection about how we might try to prepare ourselves for an aspect of cultural evolution. Cultures, with their distinctive religious traditions, have been, to a very considerable extent, shut off from each other and have evolved independently. Local historical forces, local social and economic circumstances, and so forth have contributed greatly to the development of these traditions, whatever may be their sources of revelation or other external input. And when they have developed in interaction with others, it has normally been with particular others. But now they function in a context of constant interaction with many others, or at any rate, this is the situation for many of their members.

One of my aims in what follows is to distinguish and examine a number of responses that a person might make to the knowledge of other religious traditions that is available today. I consider what sort of difference an acquaintance with the fact of religious diversity might make to someone who is a member of a particular religious tradition. In particular, what attitude should such a person take toward the beliefs and salvific prospects of members of other traditions? I examine various proposed answers to these questions. As we shall see, the main answers to be distinguished are generally best thought of as guidelines that, in turn, admit of considerable further specification. What initially appear to be well-defined and discrete positions dissolve somewhat under scrutiny, revealing significantly different variations and possibilities. And what looks like a clear distinction sometimes is better understood as a matter of degree. I will indicate

where I think it best to look for the most plausible proposals. In doing so, I will pay particular attention to what I take to be the religiously ambiguous nature of our circumstances, explaining wherein this ambiguity consists.

However, I should make it clear here at the outset that what follows is written in an exploratory mode. The project of reflecting about these matters need not be engaged in with the presumptuous attitude that we can presently address them in a full and convincing way. Instead, we need to ask what ideas will help us to navigate our way through the turbulent waters in which we find ourselves. I am open to the possibility that the best we can do at present is to think carefully together and in a spirit of mutual respect about these issues—even though I aspire to doing more than this in what follows. Indeed, in many controversial areas, I will make specific proposals about what I take to be the best way to proceed.

The Extraordinary Diversity of Religions

Before we start, a word on the extraordinary diversity of the phenomena of religion. Nobody who has reflected about these matters could fail to be aware of this diversity. There are similarities among the traditions, to be sure, but there is little, if anything, they all have in common. Here I state the obvious. There are the well-known global traditions, each of which is itself a set of different sects and strands. There are also numerous other traditions, such as the religion of the Parsees, Zoroastrianism, the Druidic religion of the Celts, numerous indigenous traditions, polytheisms of various sorts such as those of Greece or Rome or Scandinavia, and different types of animism. It seems that there never has been a culture without its own religion. There have been, and are, irreligious groups within cultures, but there does not seem to have survived for long a whole culture that was without a religion. What makes something a religion and, indeed, what determines where one tradition ends and another begins are matters I will not discuss here except to say that the value of discussing them seems at times to be inversely related to the copious amount of ink that has been consumed in their discussion.

It is hard to exaggerate the extent of the differences among the traditions. Consider just one area of disagreement, namely, the question of what a human being consists in, and compare Hinduism and Christianity on this matter. According to Hinduism—and here I simplify greatly—there is reincarnation for all living things, including human beings. We become free of the cycle of rebirths only when we realize that the soul within each of us, the *Atman*, is in fact *Brahman*, the world-soul, so that the notion that we are distinct individuals is, at the deepest level, an illusion. To recognize that the *Atman* is *Brahman* is to achieve enlightenment, which is the goal for each human being, and there are various techniques (yogas) for achieving this state.

According to Christianity, on the other hand—again, simplifying greatly—there is no reincarnation. Each person is created by God and starts to exist somewhere between conception and birth. Salvation, which is a matter of reconciliation with God, is by grace, whether bestowed directly by God on each individual or through the church and its sacraments, and it is made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Needless to say, this is just an example of the profound differences among the traditions.

In spite of this great diversity, we find that among those who hold the various views associated with the major traditions are many people of integrity. These are people who, at least in the ideal case, know a great deal, avoid exaggeration, admit ignorance when it seems appropriate to them to do so, have an interest in the truth, and are intelligent, serious, sincere, insightful, decent, sensible, and reflective. When I talk of "people of integrity" in what follows, these are the people I have in mind. It is not as if all of the people of integrity belong to one particular religion (or to none). You could sensibly believe that all (or most, or more) people of integrity are to be found in your own tradition only if you lacked contact with people of other religious traditions or managed to distance yourself mentally from them—perhaps by seeing them as less than fully human, as primitive, as cognitively defective, or as corrupt. Each tradition needs to acknowledge, as an operating assumption, that no single tradition may reasonably be distinguished from the others by virtue of the integrity of its adherents. It is especially implausible to impute a lack of integrity to others as an explanation of why they accept worldviews that are different from ours. Many devoutly religious people, in particular, find it especially difficult to concede this in the case of others who know little, and care less, about matters that are most precious to them.

Here is another equally important point to keep in mind. If you are a serious member of a religious tradition, your own tradition *feels* right. When you follow its path, you feel that you are on the right path. You have a sense of inner conviction. Your life experience—both in terms of the character of your everyday mundane experience and in terms of any manifestly religious experience you may enjoy—seems to be consistent with and even expressive of your religious perspective. The beliefs, practices, celebrations, and much more besides that are associated with your tradition feel right and appropriate, whereas those of other traditions typically feel strange and alien, assuming you even give them a moment's thought. But now consider what it must be like to be an observant Orthodox Jew or a devout Shiite Muslim, Presbyterian, or Buddhist, assuming that you do not answer to any of these descriptions. Is the sense of being on the right path any less developed, the sense of inner conviction less intense, the sense that one's life experience meshes with one's religious perspective less deep for those others? Of course not. And if we are not familiar with others and their views, with what it feels like to be one of them and with what it is like to see the world from their point of view, we should consider this as a deficiency in us and not in them.

Truth and Salvation

In our reflections about how people should respond to religious diversity, it is helpful to make a basic distinction. First, there is the question of whether more than one religious tradition might give a correct account of reality. This is the issue of *truth*. Sentences and propositions are the bearers of truth, the things that are true or false. I will assume that a sentence or proposition is true if it fits with the facts and corresponds to reality, and false if it is inconsistent with the facts.

Second, there are questions about *salvation*, or whatever the goal of a tradition may be, whether this is understood as enlightenment, liberation from rebirth, moksha, entering the Pure Land, heaven, samadhi, nirvana, satori, union with God, or something else. The questions in this area include the following: whether we survive death and, if so, in what form we do so, and what is the mechanism by which we do so? I will be more concerned, though, with the questions of whether more than one tradition could be a viable means of achieving the goal in question, of who can achieve salvation, and, more broadly, what we are to say of the salvific prospects of outsiders to our tradition. I will refer to this constellation of concerns as the issue of *salvation*.

So the term *salvation* is being used as shorthand for all of the accounts of the ideal future state for human beings (or for other beings such as nonhuman animals if they, too, are capable of salvation) that are posited by the religious traditions. Talk of salvation is always in danger of being misunderstood as pertaining to the conception of the ideal human future that is associated with some particular traditions rather than with others. Being understood in a general way here, salvation is to be understood to include cases in which individual persons are understood to continue to exist in an afterlife. It includes, too, cases in which there is continued existence but our individuality is seen to be an illusion. The Hindu notion that the Atman is Brahman exemplifies this possibility. In such cases, it seems more accurate to say that there is survival of death rather than that there is anyone who survives death. I even want to include as instances of salvation cases that are best described as involving a future existence that is connected in certain ways to our this-worldly existence but in which there is not thought to be anything that survives: rather than delve into what the relevant connections might be, however, I will just say that some strands within Buddhism exemplify what I have in mind, with their use of such metaphors as one candle being snuffed out while another is lit. Salvation also includes cases in which an afterlife is understood to be an improved version of this world, cases in which it is thought to involve another world entirely, and, of course, cases in which there is an absence of well-defined views on this matter. And I take it for granted that, by definition, salvation would involve an afterlife, although there may be a sense

of foretasting it, and it may be partially realized, or even begin, in this life. The topic of salvation also includes these questions, though I will not have a great deal to say about them: might members of another tradition, or even of more than one other tradition, achieve salvation as they conceive of it, while we achieve salvation as we conceive of it? And might there be conceptions of salvation that are different from any that are to be found in currently existing traditions, perhaps ones that combine elements of a number of different traditions?

Truth and salvation are very different matters. No particular position on the one entails or requires the corresponding position (or the most closely related position) on the other. For example, someone can consistently believe that members of some or all other traditions will, or can, achieve salvation, even in cases in which the distinctive beliefs associated with the relevant tradition, or traditions, are believed to be largely or even entirely mistaken. Moreover, someone can consistently believe both that the members of some other religious tradition are largely correct in their beliefs and yet that they will not achieve salvation, or are unlikely to do so. Within Christianity, something along these lines has sometimes been the attitude of Catholics to the salvific prospects of Protestants, and vice versa.

Attitudes to Your Own Beliefs and Attitudes to Others and to Their Beliefs

By way of setting the stage for what is to follow, here is another relevant distinction. This is a distinction between two respects in which you might respond to the presence of other traditions.

There is the issue of what changes in your own case, such as in what you believe or in the way in which you hold your beliefs, might or should occur as a result of becoming more aware of other traditions and of taking them seriously. Then there is the distinct, if related, matter of changes in your attitudes to, and beliefs about, others, as well as changes in your attitudes to their beliefs. Actually, my central interest is in the array of positions that are available, ignoring the question of whether your occupation of any such position would involve any *changes* on your part. However, if, as I shall propose, the major traditions need to make modifications in response to the fact of diversity, there is good reason to present the issue in terms of changes that may need to be made.

The distinction between "your own case" and "attitudes to, and beliefs about, others" requires some clarification. Let's start with the former. Here I will merely introduce a few options. When confronted with the great variety of traditions, one possible response is agnosticism. You might decide that the wisest course is not to accept the claims of any of them, reasoning that there seems to be no way to arbitrate between their conflicting claims. You might conclude that no one tradition has a better claim on your attention and loyalties than its competitors.

Or you might doubt your ability to think your own way through the many complex competing positions and all of the evidence that pertains to them. To become agnostic is, at least in the case of many religious traditions, to step outside the tradition. However, there is an interesting array of options available to people who remain within their tradition.

One such possibility is that you might continue to belong to your tradition but become tentative in the beliefs that you hold as a member of that tradition. In that case, you believe that your tradition, the one that you are familiar with, is the correct tradition. But this belief is held in a tentative way. So you recognize that your tradition may actually be wrong, or partly wrong, and that other traditions may be right or partly right. Perhaps you are struck by the fact that the other traditions have *their* various experts, their cultures, their wise men and women, and their people of integrity, and by the fact that they seem every bit as convinced as members of your own tradition. You may see this as a reason to adopt a tentative, undogmatic, and self-critical attitude to your own beliefs, even while you continue to hold them. This seems to me to be an option that is worth taking seriously. There are, of course, a number of possibilities along these lines. Thus you might be tentative in certain areas but skeptical in others and still see yourself as a member of your tradition.[3]

On the other hand, one might respond to increased knowledge of other traditions by becoming more confident that one's own religious position is correct than one was in the first place or by becoming more dogmatic. Or one might not engage in any reflection at all, the variety of traditions encountered never creating a ripple in one's tranquil and unthinking acceptance of one's beliefs. This would be less of a reaction and more of an absence of a reaction. And no doubt there are many other possibilities.

My main interest in what follows, however, is in what I am calling "attitudes to, and beliefs about, others." My focus, in particular, will be on these responses to other traditions or their members: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. I will be considering these as attitudes taken by members of some tradition to others, or to their beliefs and traditions. So we will generally be looking at the relevant issues from the point of view of such a person.

These are familiar and frequently discussed possibilities, but they are interpreted by scholars in a variety of ways. Indeed, they have been interpreted in almost as many ways as there have been scholars interpreting them. I confess that I, too, will follow suit. I will make some observations about how these options are best understood, both with regard to truth and with regard to salvation. And I will attempt, in the process, to sift through some of the proposals of others. As mentioned, I think we will find that what look at first glance like

3. I have engaged in some discussion of what would be involved in tentative belief in *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

distinct and well-defined positions dissolve somewhat under scrutiny. I will also make some evaluative remarks. But more on all of this anon.

I am setting aside behavioral reactions of all sorts, impressive as well as unimpressive, gentle and respectful as well as violent and aggressive. So I will not say much about the following in which we might conduct ourselves toward others. Our response to others may be to set out to convert them to our religion.[4] Paul Griffiths, a Catholic philosopher, opts for evangelism as the correct response to others.[5] He argues that this is preferable to tolerance and separation of one's own group from other groups—though this is to ignore numerous other possibilities. We might also choose to enter into extended dialogue with other groups. Much interesting work has been done on the possibility of interreligious dialogue: on its purposes, on what it requires from those who take part in it, on what might emerge from it, and so on.[6]

My interest is rather in the attitudes that are expressed by, and underpin, certain behavioral reactions. So I will, in fact, be discussing issues that have a bearing on the merits of such reactions. Thus whether we should try to convert others, for example, will be, in part, a function of whether we embrace exclusivism about salvation. Hence a discussion of the latter issue, which I shall shortly undertake, is bound to cast some light on the former issue.

Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism

Briefly, and to pave the way for much of what is to come, many of the positions to be discussed in what follows may be understood to involve one or another of the following options. With respect to some matter or other, one's own tradition is categorized in one of these ways:

4. *Dominus Iesus*, a fairly recent statement from the Vatican, mentions "the evangelizing mission of the Church, above all in connection with the religious traditions of the world" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Declaration, *"Dominus Iesus"* [On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church]; www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html (section 2). I take this to mean just what it says: that a mission of the church is to convert members of other traditions. This document also says that "[the] mission of the Church is 'to proclaim and establish among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is on earth, the seed and the beginning of that kingdom'" (section 18). (The quotation is from the Second Vatican Council.) I discuss additional themes from *Dominus Iesus* in chapter 5.

5. He draws on Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*, according to which "the missionary thrust . . . belongs to the very nature of the Christian life" (Paul Griffiths *Problems of Religious Diversity* [Boston: Blackwell, 2001],132).

6. For discussion of these matters, these books are a good place to begin: David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, ed. Lee Nichol (London: Routledge, 2004); Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970); John B. Cobb Jr., *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); and J. A. DiNoia, O.P., *A Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1992).

a. The only tradition that is any good in the relevant respect
b. The tradition that is better than other traditions in the relevant respect
c. A tradition that is as good as other traditions in the relevant respect

This three-part analysis is a first rough outline of the distinction between exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Or at least it is a good starting point for reflection. There are, at any rate, exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist *impulses* that are to be understood, or understood in part, along these lines.

With even a little thought, however, the need for further clarification is obvious. For example, the pluralist option must say not only that our tradition is as good as other traditions but also that the relevant traditions (ours and however many others are on a par with it) are *really* good in the relevant respect. As we proceed, we will expose the need for numerous refinements.

These three options—or at least a threefold set of options along these lines—are available with respect to truth and with respect to salvation. They are also available with respect to numerous other matters, such as whether traditions other than one's own provide adequate ethical guidance, are psychologically beneficial, or are anything more than purely human creations.[7] And there are other applications of these options. Thus theists may take one of these approaches to questions such as these: whether God can be encountered in other religions, whether God's grace is manifested in other religions, whether God is interested in the salvation of members of other religions, and whether we alone are the chosen people—an idea that, in turn, can be interpreted in a variety of ways. So when I restrict discussion to the application of the three options under discussion to the issues of truth and salvation, I focus only on part of the terrain they open up for exploration.[8]

7. For example, *Dominus Iesus* (section 7) appears to say that non-Christian traditions are purely human creations: "Faith . . . [is] '*a gift of God*' and '*a supernatural virtue infused by him*' [and] is the acceptance in grace of revealed truth, which 'makes it possible to penetrate the mystery in a way that allows us to understand it coherently.'. . . [On the other hand,] belief, in the other religions, is that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute." Perhaps the idea here is that as far as the matter of not being a purely human creation is concerned, ours is the only tradition that is any good. We find much the same theme in the work of the Dutch Protestant theologian Hendrik Kraemer: "Nowhere [in religions other than Christianity] do we find a radical repudiation of every possible man-made spiritual world, which is the uncanny power of the gospel" (*Religion and the Christian Faith* [London: Lutterworth, 1956], 334. Quoted in James C. Livingston and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought, Vol. 2: The Twentieth Century* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 472.

8. Even the apparently simple step of restricting the discussion in this way is not without a little complexity. Take, say, the issue of whether traditions other than one's own provide adequate ethical guidance. Providing adequate ethical guidance is best understood, in part, as a matter of saying what is true with respect to a particular matter, namely, how we should live and conduct ourselves. So

It may not be the traditions as such but rather their members that are being classified. The options—or rather, once again, the starting points for discussion—if the focus is on the members of other traditions are that:

d. We alone do well in some respect.
e. Others, too, do fairly well in this respect but not as well as we do.
f. We and others all do equally well in this respect.

The respect in question (concerning which judgments are being made) might be a matter of flourishing in a certain respect or even in general, either in this life or in a life to come, or living in an ethically admirable way, or something else. For example, on the matter of salvation there are these three options:

g. We alone can achieve salvation.
h. Others, too, can achieve salvation, but, for whatever reason, they are not in as good a position as we are to do so.
i. Salvation is equally available to everyone.

The distinction between attitudes toward a tradition and attitudes toward its members may seem otiose. Indeed, a tradition doing fairly well with respect to truth seems to amount just to the members of that tradition doing fairly well in terms of their possession of those truths. On the other hand, the distinction is an obvious one in an area such as salvation.

As we shall see, it is striking how varied have been the interpretations of these key terms: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. When we reflect about what these positions amount to and how they are best understood, we will unearth numerous interesting considerations and possibilities, through which we will have to make our way. In doing so, we will have to decide how best to map the landscape of options before us. There are, to be sure, some prominent landmarks that any such mapping must take account of, but there remain various ways to proceed. And we must construct and refine our concepts as we go along. Consideration of the *merits* of any of these positions is quite another matter, and that, in turn, will guide us in some directions rather than in others.

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whatever option we endorse concerning this matter of ethical guidance, we also in effect endorse this same option on the matter of what is true about this particular issue. However, the issue of whether traditions other than one's own provide adequate ethical guidance probably is best understood as also in part a matter of whether the members of those traditions receive, and act in accordance with, the ethical guidance in question. That is, the issue of adequacy of guidance seems not to be just a matter of whether certain views are true and probably is best understood as also a matter of whether those views *work* for those who hold them. The latter is a different matter, one that has to do with the practical consequences of adherence to other traditions. On this matter, too, the three options identified are relevant and available.

Along the way, we will consider whether these options are, in any sense, collectively exhaustive of the options. There is certainly a sense in which they are not: for example, there is no mention here of the possibility that one's own religion is in some important respect inferior to other religions. Another way in which these options could fail to be collectively exhaustive of the options would be that there might be in-between views—views that fall between, say, exclusivism and inclusivism but that are neither. We will consider whether this is so, as well as whether these three options are mutually exclusive. We will also consider the possibility that one might have different attitudes to different traditions—perhaps being exclusivistic about some and inclusivistic about others. The alternative is that these options are to be understood in a sweeping or comprehensive fashion—so that if one is an exclusivist at all, one is an exclusivist through and through. I will refer to the issue of whether these options are best understood in a sweeping way or, on the other hand, as having to do with some traditions but not others, as the issue of *scope*, and I will revisit it as I proceed. There is also the question whether one may reasonably be an exclusivist about some other tradition in some respect (say, truth) and, for example, an inclusivist about that same tradition in another respect (say, salvation). And so on. And there is the question whether one may reasonably be an exclusivist about all or some other traditions in some respect but something else with respect to those traditions in some other respects.

2

Exclusivism about Truth

Exclusivism about truth is, as you would expect, quite a different matter from exclusivism about salvation. In the simple and straightforward (and, for that matter, utterly implausible) form that I shall consider it initially, exclusivism about truth is the view that

> ET1 Our tradition is entirely right, and all other traditions are entirely wrong.

("E" is for exclusivism, "T" for truth, and "1" to indicate that it is the first significant proposition concerning exclusivism about truth that will be discussed.) ET1 says that our claims, beliefs, and principles (and anything else that could be correct, if there is, in fact, anything else) are correct, and those of other traditions are incorrect. ET1 says, too, that *all* of our claims (etc.) are true and that *all* of the claims of other traditions are false.

ET1 faces an obvious problem, a problem that is also as serious as it is obvious, and in virtue of which it can be seen at once to be untenable. The traditions have too much in common for ET1 to be plausible. To state the obvious, if the main claims of one monotheistic tradition were correct, the other monotheistic traditions would be correct when they say that God exists. The fact that every major tradition shares some beliefs with some other religion makes it impossible that one among them should be correct in all of its claims while all others are wrong in all of their claims.

Someone might object that the conceptions of God that are involved in the monotheistic traditions are sufficiently different that there is only the *appearance* of agreement among them about the existence of God. The objection would be that one group is saying that God, understood as the being whose most complete revelation to man is in the Qur'an, exists. And another group is saying that God, understood as the being whose most complete revelation is in the New Testament, exists. And so on. Hence—this objection concludes—any agreement between them about the existence of God is purely verbal. There is only the *appearance* of sharing beliefs.

But even if the relevant conceptions of God differ in respects such as the one I have just mentioned, both groups agree that there is a supremely important transcendent being that is omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent, and so on. So if one of the traditions is right about *that*, so, too, are the others. The parties in question do not think of God solely as the Qur'anic revealer or solely as the revealer of the New Testament or the like but rather, in addition, as a being that is supremely important, transcendent, omnipotent, and so on. There is therefore considerable agreement among them. So we can see why ET1 is not viable. There is too much overlap, or shared content, among the traditions for it to be viable.

There is also the possibility of exclusivism that is limited to a particular topic or area of inquiry. It would not say that we are right and others are wrong about everything but rather that we are right and others are wrong about some particular area of inquiry of religious significance, such as salvation or the origins of the universe.[1] There are various possibilities—as many at least as there are areas of significance to the religious traditions. This is a particular, as distinct from a general, rendering of exclusivism about truth. Thus there would be what I shall call "exclusivism about the truth about salvation":

> ET2 We are entirely right about salvation, and all other traditions are entirely mistaken in their claims in this area.

Claims in this area would normally include an account of what salvation consists in, of what is necessary to achieve salvation, and of who can achieve it. However, with respect to a matter such as salvation, there is also likely to be shared content. For example, all accounts of salvation agree that there is an afterlife. (This is part of what it would take, I am assuming, for there to be an account of salvation.) Hence it is impossible for one tradition alone to be correct in its claims, and for all others to be mistaken in their claims, concerning the matter of salvation.

Clearly, this reasoning does not apply solely to the particular topic of salvation. In general, specifically religious claims are identifiable as such partly in virtue of being about certain matters: the origins of the universe, human nature, human destiny, what if any supernatural beings there are, and so forth, although there are, of course, plenty of theories about these matters that are not religious. Hence insofar as a subject matter is properly classified as a religious one, claims about it probably have something significant in common—such as the claim that there is a reality of the sort under discussion. No account of a religiously

1. David Basinger defines *exclusivism* as just this sort of topic-specific view. I comment later on his definition. See notes 3 and 17.

significant matter that is proposed by a religion, therefore, is likely to escape the "shared content" problem entirely. So exclusivism about truth—at least of the sort considered so far—will probably succumb to the problem of shared content, even when it is restricted in its scope to some particular area of religious significance.[2]

As we shall shortly see, there are other proposals as to how exclusivism about truth is best understood. Still, in spite of the insurmountable obstacles that it confronts, there are reasons to consider ET1 to be, at any rate, a version of exclusivism about truth. (In the discussion that follows, I will just talk of "exclusivism" without adding "about truth" or "about salvation," provided that it is completely clear which is under discussion.)

One such reason is just that there are people who seem to espouse ET1 and it is handy to have a name for them. They seem to be at least as deserving of the name "exclusivist" as anyone else. Thus Rev. James G. Merritt, head of the Southern Baptist Convention in the United States, said recently that Christianity is "the only true religion" (*New York Times* 11/27/01). And 19% of American Christians and 7% of American non-Christians also said recently that the statement that their own religion is "the only true religion" is "closer to their own views" than is the statement that "all religions have elements of truth" (*U.S. News and World Report, Special Collector's Edition: Mysteries of Faith*, 2003, 8). It seems reasonable to assume that some of these people go all the way in this regard and endorse ET1.

2. A set of religious views that is so circumscribed that it does not succumb to the shared content problem certainly can be developed. We could proceed as follows. Consider, say, the set of beliefs about salvation held by conservative Christians. Then subtract from this set any belief that is shared with another tradition. Now consider the set of beliefs that remains. (Exactly which beliefs would be in this remaining set is a matter for discussion. It depends, of course, on who counts as a conservative Christian. The following is, at any rate, a good candidate for inclusion: belief that salvation requires both faith in Jesus Christ and belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus.) The shared content problem does not arise for the remaining set of beliefs. With respect to *this* set of beliefs and other such similarly circumscribed sets of beliefs, ET1 may be plausible. If there is no overlap, then there is no overlap problem. But the fact that a circumscribed set of beliefs of the sort under discussion can be developed is roughly as uninteresting as it is unsurprising. For one thing, someone who manages without loss of consistency to be an exclusivist in this circumscribed and artificial fashion will inevitably be something else entirely with respect to other religious beliefs she holds. Given what it takes to be a claim about a religious matter, any islands of beliefs-without-shared-content there may be will coexist in practice with other beliefs that share content. Thus, in practice, any one who holds the beliefs included in the circumscribed set under discussion will also believe that there is an afterlife, that God exists, and so on. So no one is likely to be, without loss of consistency, an exclusivist of the ET1 sort through and through. At least this is so in the case of any of the existing religious traditions. And ET1 is being considered here as an option for people who belong to traditions such as the actual ones and not for imaginary nonexistent religious possibilities with which we can entertain ourselves.

In addition, there are scholars who seem to take exclusivism (about truth) to amount, or to have been generally understood to amount, more or less, to ET1. For example, Kevin Schilbrack ("Religious Diversity and the Closed Mind," *Journal of Religion* 83[1]: 100–117, January 2003) says that people who describe themselves as exclusivists do so because "they hold that their own religion is uniquely true and other religions are false" (101). In this formulation, Schilbrack explicitly follows Paul J. Griffiths, who says that exclusivism "with respect to truth is the view that true religious claims are found only among the doctrines and teachings of the home religion" (*Problems of Religious Diversity*, xiv). Griffiths also says that what this amounts to is the view that "no alien religion has any true claims among its doctrines and teachings . . . and that the home religion is uniquely privileged with regard to the possession of religious truth" (ibid., 53). Griffiths dismisses exclusivism, so understood, on account of the shared content problem. (He also doubts that anyone has propounded it [ibid., 54f.]. But, as we have just seen, some people appear to have done so.)

However, there are statements that resemble ET1 but that have, or may have, a different import. Consider the claim:

ET3 Our tradition is right, and all other traditions are wrong.

Someone who states ET3 or an equivalent claim, such as "ours is the only true religion," may mean to state ET1. But they may not. For example, they may mean:

ET4 We are generally correct, and other traditions are generally mistaken.

For example, David Basinger writes thus:

> Usually . . . the label "religious exclusivist" is reserved for someone who believes that one, and only one, of the many incompatible basic theistic systems to which people have committed themselves contains the truth. . . . [The claim is that] only one world religion is correct, and all others are mistaken. [One], and only one, basic theistic perspective offers an accurate description of reality. (*Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Assessment* [Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2002], 4–5)[3]

What Basinger is mentioning as the normal understanding of "exclusivist" is along the lines of ET3. Some of the wording (in particular, "only one

3. Basinger says that an exclusivist, according to the common interpretation he is reporting on here, is someone who thinks that only one tradition is special in the specified respect. What he means, of course, is that an exclusivist, according to the view he is discussing, is someone who thinks that his or her own tradition is special in this respect. This detail is made explicit in his own account

[system]... contains the truth") may be somewhat suggestive of ET1. But the view under discussion here may be ET4. The same goes for Roger Boase's remark that the "exclusivist rejects the truth claims of other religions in the belief that only his or her religion is true" ("Introduction," in Roger Boase, ed., *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace* [Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005], 2).

The question, really, is what conditions must be met for ET3 to be true. In particular, does being right or correct, in the case of a religion, require being correct about everything? Would it be enough to be, say, generally correct, correct about almost everything, or correct about the most important matters? Correspondingly, there is the question of what it is for another tradition to be mistaken or wrong. Would that require being wrong in every detail, or is being wrong overall compatible with having some truths? Might a tradition that is wrong overall be, say, generally mistaken, more or less entirely mistaken, or mistaken about the most important matters?

There is a strict reading according to which a tradition is correct only if it is correct about everything, and mistaken only if it is mistaken about everything. To read ET3 in this strict way is just to take it to amount to ET1. But there are various less strict readings. One such reading is provided by ET4, according to which a tradition can be correct (as a whole)—correct in most of what it says—and yet be wrong about some things or, on the other hand, mistaken (as a whole) and yet be right about some things. Another less strict reading is as follows. Someone who asserts ET3 might mean:

> ET5 Our tradition is right about all really important religious matters, and all other traditions are wrong about these matters.

Being right about all really important religious matters would be compatible with being wrong—either generally wrong or even wrong in every detail—about less important matters.

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of exclusivism, which he presents elsewhere: "An exclusivist, as I will be using the term, is someone who believes that *her perspective on a given issue is superior in the sense that she believes that her perspective alone is true or is at least closer to the truth than any other perspective*" (my italics; see David Basinger, "Religious Diversity: Where Exclusivists Often Go Wrong," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47: 43–55, 2000, 43). Someone might believe that there is one religion whose doctrines are true or mostly true and that the doctrines of all other religions are false, but yet concede that he is unsure which religion this is. Such a person would be a rara avis, to be sure, but this combination of views is certainly not out of the question. (And perhaps we should work on cultivating habitat that would be hospitable to such a one as this.) Incidentally, Basinger's assimilation of theistic systems and religious systems, in the passage quoted in the body of the text, is puzzling, as others have noted. He explicitly classifies Theravada Buddhism, according to which there is no God, as a "basic theistic system." This is a minor verbal matter of no larger significance, however. When he writes "theistic," we should just take him to mean "religious" or something equivalent.

ET5 assumes that there are matters of religious significance that are more important and others that are less important, and I take it for granted that this is so. The distinction between what is important and what is unimportant is hardly a self-explanatory one, though it is easy to exemplify what is meant. Thus Buddhist claims about the role of boddhisattvas in human life provide a clear example of an important claim. On the other hand, that the name of a childhood friend of the Buddha was such and such is an example of an unimportant claim. Nothing much hangs on whether one is right or wrong about such a matter. Importance in this context has to do with centrality to the tradition. So such beliefs would make a significant difference to how people think and live, and it would be natural for important beliefs to be partly definitive of membership in the relevant tradition. (In the case of ET5, the question of what is involved in being right can once again be raised: does it require being completely right, which is to say right in every detail, for example, about the relevant important matters?)

Someone who asserts ET3 might even mean something along the lines of ET2:

> ET2 We are entirely right about salvation, and all other traditions are entirely mistaken in their claims in this area.

If ET2 is what someone who espouses ET3 has in mind, presumably he would endorse ET5, too, and hold that the issue of salvation is the one really important matter, or the most important among important matters, or the like. This would explain why he would say something that appears general (ET3) but mean something specific (ET2).

Or the meaning of ET3 may be indeterminate in the sense that someone who asserts it may not have thought out which of these, or other, alternatives is intended. It would not be at all surprising for exclusivism to have this sort of indeterminate character. People are busy and have all manner of other things to occupy them, and they may cheerfully live with a formulation that they deem satisfactory and good enough, even if it admits of much refinement.

Some Unassailable Nuggets of Common Sense

There is a clearly correct idea—I shall call it "an unassailable nugget of common sense"—that has at least a slight resemblance to the views that we have so far seen to deserve to be called exclusivist, or at least what we have seen to be good candidates for the title. Getting clear about this commonsense view and its close relatives will help with the process of clarifying exclusivism. What I have in mind is this:

N1 Whenever we are correct in believing some proposition p, those who reject p are mistaken (about p).

("N" is for nugget, and "1" indicates that it is the first such commonsense view to be discussed.) To reject p is just to say that p is not true.

There are various other equally unassailable nuggets of common sense that merit a mention in this context, including the following:

N2 To believe any proposition p is to be committed also to the view that not-p is false, and hence that anyone who believes not-p is mistaken.[4]

Actually, to believe p and not to believe—when the subject arises—that those who believe not-p are mistaken is, in effect, not to believe p at all. N1 and N2 are about as obviously correct and as sensible as ET1 is problematic and implausible. Perhaps there are people who mean N1 or N2 when they say ET1 or ET3, although that seems unlikely.[5]

4. On this and some later occasions, I talk about beliefs that people are "committed" to in virtue of holding certain other beliefs. However, there is no suggestion that a person who is so committed actually entertains the additional belief to which he is committed. It is rather something along the following lines. If the question were to arise, and if the person in question were aware of the implications of what they already believe, they would so believe. I am well aware that there is room for further refinement here; the exact meaning of "implications" would be a good place to begin.

5. These waters are often muddied. Consider these remarks from Isaiah Berlin in which the term *exclusivism* never appears but some relevant issues get an airing: "Few things have done more harm than the belief on the part of individuals and groups (or tribes or states or nations or churches) that he or she or they are in *sole* possession of the truth: especially about how to live, what to be & do & that those who differ from them are not merely mistaken, but wicked or mad: & need restraining or suppressing. It is a terrible and dangerous arrogance to believe that you alone are right: have a magical eye which sees the truth: & and that others cannot be right if they disagree. This makes one certain that there is *one* goal and only one for one's nation or church or the whole of humanity, & that it is worth any amount of suffering (particularly on the part of other people) if only the goal is attained. . . ." See Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 345. There are indications here that Berlin thought ET1 to be the source of great harm. Or perhaps it is ET1 combined with the view that other traditions are not merely wrong but wicked or mad and need to be restrained and suppressed. Or perhaps the problematic view has to do, or to do in part, with the question of how to live and act. But before you know it, it seems to be something along the lines of N1 that is being found to be part of the source of the mischief. ("It is a terrible and dangerous arrogance to believe that you alone are right: have a magical eye which sees the truth: & and that others cannot be right if they disagree.") Berlin appears to contend that there is something wrong, indeed, something deeply harmful, about believing not only that you alone are right but also that others who disagree with you are wrong. This is puzzling. For example, Berlin was himself adamant that there is no single goal for all of humanity, no single good way to live your life, no single way to flourish as a human being. And if all of *this* is so, then anyone who says otherwise is mistaken. So the problem is not with holding a certain position and arguing that those who reject it are mistaken. *He* thinks that those who disagree with him (about, say, whether there is a single goal for all of humanity) are wrong. It goes without saying, though, that Berlin's opposition to ET1 per se, insofar as this is what he is opposing, is well founded.

As noted, the shared content problem is the shoal on which ET1 founders, or at least is the shoal on which ET1, when advocated by a member of any of the major religious traditions, founders. A third equally unassailable nugget of common sense identifies the obvious deficiency in ET1, given the fact of shared content:

> N3 Whenever we are correct in believing some proposition p, others who believe p are also correct when they believe p.

And a counterpart of N2, this time focusing on what one is committed to in the case of those who agree with us and their views, should also be mentioned:

> N4 To believe any proposition p is to be committed to the view that others who agree with us about p are just as correct as we are in believing p.

Obviously, no one can claim ownership of these nuggets of common sense. All four of them should be thought of as ingredients in any position that is worth taking seriously, and indeed in any coherent position—and hence, I suppose, in anything that deserves to be considered to be a position.

And none of the aforementioned nuggets of common sense has anything in particular to do with exclusivism. Inclusivists, pluralists, and the proponents of almost every "ism" under the sun can consistently endorse all of them. (And as the last paragraph indicates, they are consistent only if they do so.) If any of these four propositions *were* what exclusivism consists in, everyone who is consistent—and irrespective of whether for independent reasons we might be inclined to consider them to be inclusivists, pluralists, or something else—would be an exclusivist![6]

Additional Interpretations of Exclusivism (about Truth)

There are other readings of exclusivism. Some propose something along the following lines, or at least something that includes the following:

> ET6 The claims of our tradition are true, other traditions are correct when they accept our claims, and they are mistaken when they reject our claims.

6. Basinger (*Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Assessment*, 4–5) and Schilbrack ("Religious Diversity and the Closed Mind," 105, n.) make much the same point.

ET6, in effect, combines N1, N3, and the claim that the beliefs of one's own tradition are true.[7] Some scholars read exclusivism in this way. (Actually, none of the authors I go on to discuss mentions N3 or its contents, but I think we can safely take it for granted that it is being assumed.) For example, Jerome Gellman defines an exclusivist as someone who "believes that her religion is true, and that other religions are false insofar as they contradict her home religion" ("In Defence of a Contented Religious Exclusivism," *Religious Studies* 36: 401–417, 2000 401). Perhaps William L. Rowe provides another example. He introduces exclusivism as the view that "the truth lies with [one's] own religion and…any religion holding opposing views is, therefore, false" (*Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. [Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001], 163).

Alvin Plantinga's reading of exclusivism seems to be along these lines, too. His concern is with Christian exclusivism, in particular ("Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker, eds., *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 172–192). By way of example of what this would consist in, he asks us to consider the following propositions:

(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)

and

(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.

Plantinga characterizes as an exclusivist someone who continues to believe such propositions as these to be true and to believe to be false any propositions that are incompatible with them, in spite of knowing that other religious traditions disagree.[8] Plantinga also says that an exclusivist "holds that the tenets or some

7. A couple of additional details about the meaning of ET6. To say that others accept our claims is just to say that they share some beliefs with us. There is no suggestion of ownership on our part of the beliefs in question. Nor is there any suggestion that others acquire the beliefs in question from us. Moreover, I am not assuming, here or elsewhere, any distinction between belief and acceptance.

8. Plantinga "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," 174. Plantinga adds some other conditions that, in his view, must also be satisfied if one is to count as an exclusivist—conditions that, at first glance, appear puzzling. To be a Christian exclusivist, you must also "have had [the existence of other faiths] 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" (Plantinga, 175). To be an exclusivist you must also "believe that you know of no arguments that would necessarily convince all or most honest and intelligent dissenters of your own religious allegiances" (Plantinga, 176). And you must know that there is "much that at least looks like genuine piety or devoutness

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" (176).[9]

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in them" (Plantinga, 176). So, to summarize the relevant conditions: first, you must have reflected about pluralism; second, you must believe that you do not have arguments that would convince everyone; and, third, you must believe that there is apparent piety and devotion in other religions. The explanation of Plantinga's inclusion of these seemingly extraneous elements in his account of exclusivism is, I believe, as follows. His aim in the essay under discussion is in part to refute the charge that exclusivism is morally problematic. Hence he does not include among those to be classified as exclusivists people who can easily evade this charge. Thus a relatively innocent believer (first case) and a believer who thinks himself to have a convincing case for his position (second case) could not sensibly be said to be doing anything morally wrong in virtue of holding the relevant belief. The charge that one is going wrong morally can be deflected at once in *those* cases. The same goes for those who see no evidence of genuine piety or devoutness in adherents of other religions: perhaps it seems to them as if others are just going through the motions. (Still, there are cases and cases: someone might have failed to reflect on the problem of pluralism because of carelessness on her part or because she is indifferent or hostile to other groups. Or she might have seen no evidence of genuine piety or devoutness in others just because she refuses to face up to its presence, or the like. So we need to assume something like this: no wrong steps throughout the history of one's acquisition and retention of the relevant belief.) Hence Plantinga does not count as exclusivists people who are in these categories. He focuses instead on cases in which the charge of going wrong morally could possibly stick and hence requires a response. And he thinks he *has* a ready response at hand in such cases and hence that his sort of exclusivist is not morally culpable. (And he may be right about that.) But this is an odd approach. It is odd to forgo classifying someone as an exclusivist just because they believe they have arguments that would convince anyone who is honest and intelligent and so on. For one thing, it may be precisely the belief that they have such a case that gives rise to everything about them that leads us to classify them as exclusivists. Surely, a better way to proceed would simply be to say that there are *some* exclusivists who certainly are not doing anything morally wrong, such as those who are innocent (in the relevant sense) or who believe that they have at their disposal arguments that should convince every reasonable person or those who see no evidence of piety or devotion in the lives of others, and then to address the remaining cases. (Thanks to Josh Nelson for comments on these issues.)

9. Plantinga's aim in the paper under discussion is to defend exclusivism from various criticisms. Exclusivism, he observes, has been mightily abused and called almost every name in town: irrational, egotistical, unjustified, intellectually arrogant, elitist, and more besides. As we have seen, his exclusivist is (with some qualifications that I have just discussed in note 8) someone "who continues to believe [such propositions as (1) and (2)] and to believe to be false any propositions that are incompatible with them in spite of knowing that other religions disagree" (174) and who "holds that the tenets or some of the tenets of one religion . . . are in fact true [and that religious beliefs] that are incompatible with those tenets are false" (174). However—and this once again illustrates the variety of interpretations of exclusivism that are extant—some of the critics of exclusivism have not had in mind what Plantinga takes exclusivism to consist in. For example, Joseph Runzo, who charges exclusivism with elitism, seems to take exclusivism to be the combination of the claim that "only one world religion is correct, and all others are mistaken" and the further claim that "salvation can only be found either . . . inside a particular institutional structure, or on the basis of a specified tradition of religious beliefs, symbols, and rituals. . . ." (See Joseph Runzo, "God, Commitment, and Other Faiths: Pluralism vs Relativism," *Faith and Philosophy* 5[4]: October 1988, 347.) Exactly what Runzo has in mind here with respect to truth is not entirely clear. Maybe it is ET1 or ET3. But whatever it is, it does not amount to what Plantinga calls exclusivism. Apart from anything else, his three qualifications are entirely absent. So Plantinga is not defending what some, at least, of the critics of exclusivism to whom he is responding are attacking.

On Being Generally Right

In their introduction to *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, Kevin Meeker and Philip Quinn propose what is, in effect, a slight modification of ET6. In doing so, they invoke what is distinctive of ET4, namely, the idea that most of our beliefs are true—which I take to be equivalent to saying that our beliefs are generally correct. They characterize "doctrinal exclusivism" as the view that "the doctrines of one religion are *mostly* true and the doctrines of all the others, when they conflict, are false" (3, my italics).[10] If we change ET6 to reflect this slight modification, we get the following:

> ET7 Most of the claims of our tradition are true, other traditions are correct when they accept our claims, and they are mistaken when they reject our claims.

However, anyone who considers an advocate of ET7 to be an exclusivist will presumably also consider an advocate of ET6 to be an exclusivist, so that such a person in effect thinks anyone who accepts either ET6 or ET7 to be an exclusivist. What we get if we combine them together is the result that an exclusivist is someone who believes:

> ET8 The claims of our tradition are true, or most of them are true; other traditions are correct when they accept our claims; and they are mistaken when they reject our claims.

However, the idea that *most* of our claims are true introduces the following obvious complications. If our beliefs are (only) mostly true, some of them are false. And if some of our beliefs are false and others accept one or more of these false beliefs, the beliefs in question will be just as false when others believe them as they are when we believe them. Correspondingly, if there are beliefs of others that contradict any false beliefs of ours, those particular beliefs of theirs will be true. (It would not be hard to come up with additional nuggets of common sense that formulate the relevant points.) The best way to deal with these complications is to say that when other traditions accept *one of our true claims*, they, too, are correct. Likewise, when other traditions reject *one of our true claims*, they are

10. What Meeker and Quinn mean is that a doctrinal exclusivist is someone who thinks that the doctrines of *his or her own* tradition are mostly true. (See note 3.) Michael Peterson et al. make much the same move and think in terms of most of one's beliefs being true. (See Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 2003].)

mistaken. ET8, in turn, needs to be modified to take account of these changes. What we then have is:

> ET9 The claims of our tradition are true, or most of them are true; other traditions are correct when they accept our true claims; and they are mistaken when they reject our true claims.[11]

Actually, the idea that most of our claims are true, with its implicit fallibilist acknowledgment that we may be wrong about certain matters, adds another complication. Any acknowledgment that any of our beliefs may be mistaken may seem antithetical to the religious sensibility.[12] But here are five points to consider, each of which may help to mitigate this concern. First, religious beliefs undergo change over time. For that reason alone, an acknowledgment that our tradition, whatever it may be, may not currently be getting everything right seems in order. Second, many traditions are willing to acknowledge the fragility of human cognition. Such an acknowledgment fits well with recognizing the possibility of some error in what we believe. For example, Clark Pinnock, an evangelical Christian scholar, writes as follows while arguing from within Christianity for "epistemological modesty": "Although we trust in Jesus Christ unreservedly, we admit that we only know in part, in finite, fragile ways. Unlike God's understanding, human understanding is partial and provisional" (*A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992], 146). Third, believers who are willing to acknowledge the possibility of some error may wish to recall the distinction between more important and less important beliefs and to acknowledge the possibility of error only in the latter case. For example, Kevin Corcoran, a Christian philosopher, thinks in terms of a series of concentric circles, at the center of which are beliefs such as those espoused in the early church creeds and that he considers essential to Christian orthodoxy. If you move out far enough, you reach a level where a belief may have

11. Michael Peterson et al. provide what is, in effect, another way to address the complication just mentioned. They define "doctrinal exclusivism" as the view that "the doctrines of one religion are mostly true while contradictory claims in other traditions are mostly false" (*Reason and Religious Belief*, 270). I prefer the approach that is reflected in ET9. For one thing, there is no reason to exclude by definitional fiat the possibility that the claims of ours that are contradicted by others are *all* true, in which case their contradictory claims are all false, and not just *mostly* false.

12. Anthony Kenny provides a nice statement of one form that this concern may take. Commenting on his own early doubts about transubstantiation and about the significance such doubts had for him, he writes: "To fail to believe even one [doctrine] was not only sinful in itself, it called in question one's belief in all the other doctrines: for one could not be believing them with the correct motive, namely that they were revealed by God through Christ and his Church. That is why, for a Catholic, a doubt about any doctrine is, in a manner, a doubt about every doctrine" (*A Path from Rome* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986], 148.

had a prominent place in the tradition and yet may be judged under certain conditions to be false without abandoning the tradition. (In fact, Corcoran interestingly goes on to argue that belief in a soul actually has this peripheral significance in the case of Christianity. See *Rethinking Human Nature: A Christian Materialist Alternative to the Soul* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006], 19f.) Fourth, believers who are willing to acknowledge the possibility of some error may wish to distinguish between their beliefs as currently interpreted and their beliefs as they would be if they were correctly interpreted, with the possibility of error being conceded only in the former case. Actually, the idea that our beliefs as currently interpreted could do with some improvement is an interesting one that could be explored further. The idea might just be that some error may have crept into them. Or we might suspect that our current forms of thought, the currently available array of concepts, our current metaphysical assumptions, or the like distort the content of our beliefs, and we might imagine ourselves being free of what we take to be such distorting influences. Fifth, the acknowledgment of fallibility here may be modest in the sense that we would admit only that we may be wrong about a small number of beliefs. Taken together, these points at least blunt the force of the claim that fallibilism is alien to religious belief. (It might also be questioned whether a view that involves a fallibilist dimension may reasonably be classified as exclusivist. I comment on this issue in the next section.)

Exclusivists Understand Themselves to Do Best in Terms of Truth

What we have arrived at with ET9 is a reasonable reconstruction of a number of interpretations of exclusivism that have been proposed. However, ET9 is consistent with its being the case that the teachings of one or more traditions other than one's own are mostly true. ET9 is also consistent with its being the case that the teachings of another tradition are entirely true. And to make matters worse, ET9 is even consistent with its being the case that another tradition has more truths in total than we have. None of this is ruled out by ET9. And a position that is consistent with its being the case that the views of others are mostly (and especially all) true seems not to be a good candidate to count as exclusivism about truth. Nor does a position that is consistent with others having more truths than we have or, for that matter, others doing better than us in terms of truth in any respect. It is more natural to think exclusivism to say, or entail, that most of the beliefs of others are not true, and certainly that they have fewer truths than we have.

A related objection to ET9 as a statement of exclusivism may be presented as follows. Suppose that someone's religion is a very pluralistic one that says that all religions are right about everything. Suppose, for good measure, that this

religion also says that all religions are equally viable means to salvation. And for even better measure, suppose this religion endorses universalism about salvation. Everyone will be saved. Let's call someone who belongs to such a religion a *thoroughgoing pluralist*. (Let's assume, too, while we are at it, that there are enough thoroughgoing pluralists around and that they have the requisite connections with each other for us to say that there is a thoroughgoing pluralist tradition.) Believing all of the things that are distinctive of thoroughgoing pluralism, and believing that other traditions are mistaken when they reject his claims, the thoroughgoing pluralist counts as an exclusivist if ET9 is what exclusivism consists in. Yet, needless to say, it is counterintuitive to consider someone who endorses thoroughgoing pluralism to be an exclusivist, no matter how adamant he may be about the errors of those who disagree with him. And this is so just because he both explicitly rejects something that, intuitively, we are inclined to think of as definitive of exclusivism and explicitly asserts views that, intuitively, we are inclined to think of as being about as far removed from exclusivism as they could be.[13]

The obvious solution in the case of thoroughgoing pluralism is to impose a restriction on the extent to which an exclusivist can allow that the claims of another tradition are true. This restriction might involve saying, for example, that almost all, or most of, or the vast majority of, the claims of other traditions are false. Let's work with the idea that their claims are generally mistaken, bearing in mind that this is vague and shorthand for a variety of restrictions of the sort mentioned.[14] So what we now have is this:

> ET10 The claims of our tradition are true, or most of them are true; other traditions are correct when they accept our true claims; and they are mistaken when they reject our true claims; and their claims are generally mistaken.

This enables us to deal with the case of the thoroughgoing pluralist. What has been added is a restriction on the content of beliefs that one holds if one is to be counted as an exclusivist. It is hardly surprising that a view is not properly counted as exclusivism unless it excludes. To be sure, thoroughgoing pluralism does exclude some people in a certain respect. If it is to be consistent, it says (in accordance with N1) that anyone who denies thoroughgoing pluralism is

13. Comments from Blair Goodlin have helped me to think about the issues discussed in this paragraph.

14. I will not probe further what might be involved in this. But there are many details one might go into. For example, does exclusivism also require us to hold that whatever beliefs about religious matters others may have that are neither shared with us nor contradict our beliefs are generally mistaken?

mistaken. So those who reject thoroughgoing pluralism are, in effect, excluded from being correct.[15] On the other hand, just because of what thoroughgoing pluralism amounts to, it is in an important and obvious respect not exclusivist at all. After all, it says that everyone is correct about everything and all routes to salvation are equally good. That is about as unexclusivist as one can be! In any case, this problem is dealt with by the modification that takes us to ET10.

If, in accordance with ET10, most (or even all) of our claims are true and the claims of other traditions are generally false, then it is unlikely that another tradition could reasonably be described as, in any respect, doing better than us in terms of truth. Still, one can imagine a situation, however unrealistic it may be, in which our tradition makes very few claims—six or so perhaps—and most of these claims, say, five of them, are true. At the same time, let's imagine another tradition that makes a very large number of claims—hundreds, in fact—and their claims are generally mistaken but, say, six of their claims are correct. In that case, most of our claims are true, the claims of others are generally mistaken, and yet they actually make more true claims than we make. This is fanciful, no doubt, but it is not out of the question. Perhaps a position should not be classified as exclusivism unless it rules out such a possibility.

One way to rule out such a possibility (and even at the risk of overkill) is to add to ET10 a recognition of the need to do best in terms of truth in every respect. So what we have is the following as a statement of what exclusivism consists in:

> ET11 The claims of our tradition are true, or most of them are true, and in all respects we do best in terms of truth; other traditions are correct when they accept our true claims; and they are mistaken when they reject our true claims; and their claims are generally mistaken.

ET11 requires that someone must be committed to thinking of themselves as doing best in terms of truth in all of the various respects in which one might do so, if they are to count as an exclusivist. (So with ET11, we have an all-purpose solution to the problems for ET9 that were mentioned in the first paragraph of this section.) This would include the following respects.

15. Since *most* people think that thoroughgoing pluralism is mistaken, the thoroughgoing pluralist is, in fact, committed to most people being mistaken, at least with regard to this issue. Mind you, there is something decidedly fishy about thoroughgoing pluralism. It says that all religions are correct in everything they say. Now there are entire religious traditions that contend that thoroughgoing pluralism is itself mistaken. And according to thoroughgoing pluralism, those traditions are correct about this because they are correct about everything. It does not require great investigation to see that thoroughgoing pluralism is self-contradictory. However, the reasons for moving from ET9 to ET10 are not dependent on thoroughgoing pluralism being a coherent position.

First, there is the idea that more of the claims of our tradition are true than is the case for any other tradition in the sense that *the actual number* of true claims espoused by our tradition is larger. So our tradition might be thought to make, say, ten true claims, whereas the closest competitor might be thought to make, say, three true claims.

Second, another sense in which it might be that more of the claims of a tradition are true than is the case for any other tradition is just that *a larger percentage* of the claims of our tradition are true than is the case for any other tradition: 95% for us, 20% for the best among the competition, perhaps. Some traditions may be inclined to hold that 100% of their own claims are true. But—to revisit an earlier theme—a tradition might, and probably should, be willing to settle for a lower figure.

Third, there is the somewhat different idea that one's own tradition makes a larger number of true claims about the most important matters of religious significance. Or it has a larger proportion of such claims. Then there is the idea that one's own tradition has achieved a deeper and fuller insight into some set of beliefs than has any other tradition, even if it shares those beliefs with others. So the idea would be that while some of the same truths are taught by our tradition and by other traditions, our tradition grasps them more thoroughly, teaches them more comprehensively, pays greater attention to their implications, or the like. In addition, if we allow that our tradition may have some errors, ours must be fewer and more benign than those of others.

These are some respects in which one tradition might do better than the others in terms of truth, and there probably are others that I have not mentioned. So the notion of outperforming others in terms of truth can be unpacked and has a number of dimensions. And ET11, as mentioned, is to be taken to mean that in every respect in which our tradition could do better than other traditions in terms of truth, it does so. This must be so to a significant extent: inching ahead of the competition would not suffice.[16]

The need to include in our notion of exclusivism something along the lines of doing better than (all) other traditions (or, what is the same thing, doing best among the traditions) in terms of truth is recognized by David Basinger and by Paul Griffiths. Basinger proposes this definition:

> [Someone] is a religious exclusivist with respect to a given issue when she believes the doctrinal perspective of only one basic theistic system (for in-

16. So far, we have not considered the possibility that other traditions might have their own truths—that is, beliefs that are true and that they recognize but that we do not recognize. The question arises whether exclusivism is best understood to rule out this possibility. Or would it be reasonable to count as an exclusivist someone who acknowledges that others may have, say, a small number of relatively unimportant truths of their own, or truths of their own that are not religiously significant? I address this issue in chapter 3.

> stance, only one of the major world religions) or only one of the doctrinal variants within a basic theistic system (for instance, [within] Christianity) to be the truth *or at least closer to the truth* than any other doctrinal perspective on this issue. (*Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Assessment*, 6, my italics)[17]

Paul Griffiths says that "one of the impulses behind" exclusivism "is the impulse to declare the home religion especially privileged with respect to truth" (*Problems of Religious Diversity*, 56). I am not suggesting that either of these scholars has exactly ET11 in mind. But this proposition gives expression to something they both consider fundamental.

By this point, we can, I think, see why it is reasonable to classify some views that incorporate fallibilism as exclusivistic. The point is just that even if we acknowledge that we may be wrong about certain things, we retain the ideas that we are right about a great deal and that in general we do better than others in terms of truth. The idea is that there would be sufficient exclusivistic elements for what we have to be classified, on balance, as exclusivism. On the other hand, if someone concedes that there is, say, a significant chance that he is wrong about *many* of his religious beliefs, it probably would not make sense to consider him to be an exclusivist. (That being said, there would be nothing fundamentally wrong with proposing that fallibilism is incompatible with exclusivism. We could impose this restriction if we so chose.)

There is also a weaker counterpart to ET11 that needs to be considered. This would not require that we do best in *all* respects in terms of truth. Rather, it would require that overall we do best in terms of truth, where this allows some trade-offs, permitting us to do less well than others in some respects. Someone might question, just by way of example, whether the number of relatively insignificant truths should matter so much. What we would have in that case is this:

> ET12 The claims of our tradition are true, or most of them are true, and overall we do best in terms of truth; other traditions are correct when they accept

17. I am citing these remarks here on account of the italicized clause. But I also want to comment briefly on the first sentence, where Basinger indicates that he eschews the general for the particular, defining *exclusivism* as a position adopted with respect to a particular issue or a particular area of enquiry. Basinger's reason for taking a particular rather than a general approach is that some people are exclusivists only with respect to particular issues and not in general. However, given this reasoning, and given also that there are others who are exclusivists in general, probably it is best to have a disjunctive notion of exclusivism that allows it to occur at either level. So there is exclusivism with respect to a particular issue, such as salvation (as in ET2), and there is exclusivism tout court. Someone who is an exclusivist with respect to one or more particular issues may be something else with respect to other issues or on the whole. I will not say much about issue-specific exclusivism, but it is an option that is worthy of careful consideration.

our true claims; and they are mistaken when they reject our true claims; and their claims are generally mistaken.

Closed and Open Exclusivism

Here are two important aspects of both ET11 and ET12 that admit of degree:

the extent to which our tradition outperforms other traditions in terms of truth
the extent to which others are correct.

If we *greatly* outperform others in terms of truth—which seems to be the sort of position that it would be reasonable to count as exclusivist—this can be so when, say, others have 1% of the number of truths we have or when they have 20% of the number of truths that we have. Likewise, in the case of the extent to which others are correct. There is, once again, a range of cases that are compatible with exclusivism, some of which attribute modest success in this regard to other traditions.

ET1, the position with which I started this discussion of exclusivism about truth, involves one end of both of these continua. It says that we are completely right and others are completely wrong. Hence, according to ET1, we outperform others in terms of truth to the greatest extent to which it is possible to do so. So it is the most exclusivistic view there could be (in this respect). ET11, on the other hand, allows that others may enjoy some modest success in the relevant respects, although we certainly outscore them in terms of truth in every respect in which it is possible to do so. (ET12, in turn, requires that we outscore them overall but not necessarily in every respect.)

If others score moderately well in terms of truth, this may be because their views and our views overlap. Overlap, too, is a matter of degree. It can be modest or extensive. It can be about important or unimportant matters. It is consistent with exclusivism, I should think, that the views of others should overlap with ours to any degree that is modest. But anything more than this would presumably take us beyond exclusivism. Actually, there is a story to be told, too, about what modesty in the case of overlap would consist in. The natural reading is, I think, in terms of a small total number of shared beliefs. But there are alternatives, such as this one: the small fraction of our total set of beliefs that is shared with other groups. The importance of the beliefs involved might also be relevant.

So is there a best way to understand exclusivism about truth? ET1 is the most exclusivistic view among those I have mentioned. It is also the most exclusivistic view that there could be. So if any view is to count as exclusivism,

ET1 should do so. But what is the full range of exclusivist views? After some to-and-fro, I have concluded that the best approach is to think of exclusivism as extending over a certain range. At one end, there is what I think of as closed exclusivism (ET1). At the other end, there are ET11 and ET12, which are best thought of as versions of open exclusivism. We can think of the various other ETs encountered along the way either as partial, incomplete, and not fully thought out statements of open exclusivism or, in some cases, as additional readings of exclusivism.

It is clear why ET1 counts as exclusivism: others are excluded by ET1 from saying anything true. But others are not excluded thus by ET11 or ET12, for example. Certainly, the openness that ET11 involves has something inclusivistic about it that is absent entirely from ET1. However, here are four reasons to take a more expansive approach.

First, on grounds of courtesy, and in the absence of a compelling reason to do otherwise, anyone who calls himself an exclusivist probably should have his position so classified. There are people who call themselves exclusivists, who think along the lines of ET6, for example, and whose views, insofar as they are to be statements of exclusivism, can be rendered most plausible as ET11 or ET12. There is therefore reason to include these people and their views in the exclusivist fold. (Who would you or I be to tell them that they are not what they think they are?)

Second, ET11 (with ET12 as a variation), I propose, is where you end up if you set out to develop a version of what started out as ET1, modifying it step-by-step in response to difficulties encountered and questions raised, including questions about what views are most reasonably classified as exclusivist, building as you do so on the various interesting proposals we have surveyed. At every stage prior to ET11, what you have is something that is problematic. Either it is implausible, as in ET1 itself, or there is something inadequate about it as an account of exclusivism—something that probably would be modified if those who are deploying the notion of exclusivism, either as a way of thinking of themselves or as a way of thinking of others, were to have their attention drawn to it.

Third, on grounds of respect for fellow scholars and, again, in the absence of a compelling reason to do otherwise, any position that is classified in the literature as exclusivism, or that emerges upon analysis as an improved version of a position that is thus classified, probably should continue to be so classified.

Fourth, if we take ET1 (alone) to be exclusivism, we have taken exclusivism to be very implausible. Since there are people who call themselves exclusivists, it behooves us not to attribute to them an implausible position, if there is a viable way to avoid doing so. (However, if there are people who really mean to endorse ET1, we can hardly be faulted in this regard in *their* case.) It is in part the wish not to attribute something obviously problematic to the advocates of exclusivism that has propelled us forward till we have reached ET11.

By taking this expansive approach that thinks of exclusivism as extending over a certain range, I certainly deviate from where I started. In chapter 1, in the course of taking a first look at what exclusivist (and other) options might be thought to consist in, I suggested the following as a starting point for reflection about exclusivism: it is the view that with respect to some matter or other one's own tradition is understood to be the only tradition that is any good in the relevant respect. Obviously, if we go beyond ET1 at all, we have already departed from this starting point.

Is there a point where open exclusivism ends and inclusivism begins? Or are open exclusivism and inclusivism (about truth) best understood to overlap somewhat or—at the other extreme—not to be contiguous at all? Certainly, there is, so to speak, a vast expanse between ET1 and pluralism about truth—which is roughly the view that all of the traditions are entirely true. If we go along with what I have proposed, one possibility we are rejecting is that inclusivism fills this entire expanse from ET1 to pluralism. If so, where does inclusivism begin? What might inclusivism about truth add that is not present already in open exclusivism? These are among my topics in the next chapter.

Needless to say, it is in the end in part a verbal matter whether one considers ET1 or ET11 or both (or some variant of one or both of these, or some combination of the ingredients that have been mentioned, or something else entirely) to be exclusivism about truth. Obviously, one could sensibly argue that ET1 is real exclusivism and that the other views discussed, all the way to ET11, are views that tend toward, or are close to, or share much with exclusivism; or that ET1 is pure exclusivism and that the others are impure. And so on. We have seen enough in the course of our perusal of what people mean, or might mean, or would mean if they were to think through certain salient issues to know that exclusivism has been, and can be, interpreted in quite a variety of ways. There is no obviously correct way to do so, and getting it right is to some extent a matter of construction. Of course, in the end, it is not the definition that matters. Rather, what matters is whether the position itself, once we have agreed on what it amounts to, is a good (or bad, ugly, plausible, etc.) one. Incidentally, given the variation in the usage of such an important term, one can imagine that there could occur debates in which people mistakenly think they are agreeing when they are not, as well as debates in which people mistakenly think they are disagreeing when they are actually agreeing.

Two final details. First, a comment on the issue of the scope of exclusivism. On the one hand, ET1 concerns *all* others since it says that all other traditions are hopeless in the relevant respect. So it is sweeping in its scope. On the other hand, the issue of whether, and to what extent, there is overlap between our views and the views of others has to be taken on a case-by-case basis. What one would expect is that our views overlap slightly with the views of some and overlap with the views of others to a considerable extent. Whether there is

such overlap is a matter of fact though people can be wrong in their judgments about such matters, perhaps exaggerating the differences in times of tension and exaggerating similarities when moved by a spirit of ecumenism or when adversity makes for solidarity with the relevant others.

Second, it is worth noting that exclusivism—or, for that matter, any of the competing options I will consider later—might be thought of as an interim response, as a starting point for reflection that is endorsed even while it is recognized that further reflection is needed, and even while hoping to engage in this reflection in the future. The relevant issues may, for example, seem too perplexing or too time-consuming to be addressed all at once. Someone who adopts exclusivism in this provisional fashion may also decide that until such time as she is in a position to react in a more careful and considered way, she is going to continue living and thinking in the accustomed way. Perhaps it is a matter of staying in the exclusivist tradition to which she belongs and that may to some extent define who she is. Continuing with it, even while acknowledging the value of further reflection, may seem preferable to launching out into the unknown. The interim adoption of a position such as exclusivism is not unreasonable. It may also be fairly common. But exclusivism need not have this interim, provisional, to-be-revisited character. It may instead involve a more studied and more stable outlook.

3

Inclusivism about Truth

The very name *inclusivism* suggests that others are somehow to be included, that one has some space for others. What is it that they are to be included in? And what does their being included consist in? How is inclusivism about truth, in particular, best understood? (As in the previous chapter, I will usually drop "about truth" unless it is called for by the context or helpful as a reminder of what we are talking about.)

If exclusivism (about truth) were just the implausible position with which I began my discussion of that topic (namely, ET1), perhaps we would have moved from exclusivism to inclusivism once we have acknowledged that there are any truths at all in other traditions. Given the more expansive approach to exclusivism that I have proposed in light of popular usage, scholarly discussion, and what intuitively it seems reasonable to classify as exclusivism, it is less obvious how the distinction between exclusivism and inclusivism should be drawn. Mind you, if we were instead to restrict exclusivism to ET1, some of the issues that have arisen in the course of our attempt to clarify exclusivism presumably would instead surface in the course of discussion of differences among forms of inclusivism.

One way to begin thinking about how inclusivism about truth is best understood is to consider again the final formulation of open exclusivism that we considered in the last chapter:

> ET12 The claims of our tradition are true, or most of them are true, and we do best overall in terms of truth; other traditions are correct when they accept our true claims; and they are mistaken when they reject our true claims; and their claims are generally mistaken.

Then we ask ourselves what changes would need to be made in ET12 if it is to be turned into a position that we would consider to be inclusivistic.

We have seen that open exclusivism admits of degrees in these respects:

The extent to which our tradition outperforms other traditions in terms of truth
The extent to which others are correct

The possibility that immediately suggests itself is that we are inclusivists if we hold that while our tradition outscores others in terms of truth, some or all other traditions nevertheless score quite well, and we do not greatly outperform them in this respect. So our assessment of others is fairly favorable in certain key respects. And the home religion is superior but not overwhelmingly so. Naturally, we might be positive in the relevant respects in our estimate of some other traditions but not in our estimate of others.

The idea, then, is that inclusivism will incorporate these elements of open exclusivism:

The claims of our tradition are true, or most of them are true.
We do best overall in terms of truth.
Other traditions are correct when they accept our true claims.
They are mistaken when they reject our true claims.

In addition inclusivism will say that

IT1 Others do fairly well overall in terms of truth, and we are only somewhat better off than they are in this regard.

("I" for inclusivism, and so on.) In line with the discussion of the last chapter, the additional idea would be that if we are *not* prepared to be this positive in terms of our evaluation of others, perhaps we are exclusivists about truth. (Whether this follows partly depends on whether we think of exclusivism and inclusivism as so related that once you step out of the one—in the direction of the other—you have arrived in the other, so that there is no space between them.) However, IT1 needs some clarification, and it may need modification. There are various i's we might dot, various t's we might cross, and even an *L* to be introduced.[1]

On the Possibility That We Might Learn from Others

If other traditions have some true beliefs, one possibility is that this is so solely because their views overlap with ours so that we and they share some beliefs. And to think of others as recognizing part of what we recognize is to include

1. I am also well aware that key terms in IT1 ("do fairly well overall" and "somewhat better off") are vague. But this vagueness seems unavoidable.

them in an important respect. Indeed, Paul Griffiths proposes that the idea that our tradition includes the truths of others is "what provides the position's name" (*Problems of Religious Diversity*, 57). I will revisit this proposal.

The overlap in question can vary in certain ways. There are the issues of its extent, whether it concerns important and central truths as distinct from truths that are relatively trivial and relatively peripheral, whether it concerns matters that are manifestly religious as distinct from, say, matters of behavior or ethical matters, and more besides.

The other possibility is that others have truths of their own, truths that they know or believe (etc.) but that are not shared by us. This possibility has already put in a passing appearance but has not yet been explicitly discussed. If others have truths of their own, there is a possibility that we might learn something from them. And we might be open to doing so. There are two distinct elements here: on the one hand, the positive assessment of others that is involved in recognizing that they may have truths of their own and, on the other hand, an openness to learning from them. One of these could be present without the other. Thus we might acknowledge that others may have truths of their own even while we lack any interest in, or openness to, learning any such truths from them. Correspondingly, a willingness to learn from them might be combined with complete uncertainty as to whether they actually have any truths of their own and hence whether there actually is anything to be learned from them. But one would expect these two elements to go together, which is how I shall treat them in the ensuing discussion. Let's introduce these two elements as:

IT2 Others may be right about beliefs that we do not hold.

and

L. We are open to learning from others.

("L" for "learn.") IT2 says that others may believe something that is true but that we have not yet recognized to be true. (If knowledge is a special case of belief, a special case of IT2 would allude to cases in which others may know what we do not know.) If others have no truths of their own, then we are back to the first possibility: to say that others have any truths at all is to say that there is overlap between our views and theirs.

If our views overlap extensively with those of another tradition (albeit one that scores less well overall in terms of truth than we score), we can hardly doubt their ability to arrive at truths in areas of religious significance. They have already done so on a significant scale. Maybe we should even go so far as to say that the more overlap there is, the more reasonable it is to expect others to have

truths of their own, and hence for us to be open to learning from them. One might reason as follows. If they have many true religious beliefs that they share with us, their relevant belief-forming practices must function well much of the time. So perhaps there is reason to think that they may have truths of their own—that is, true beliefs that we are as yet unaware of.[2]

Overlap, as mentioned, is a matter of fact. Either it is present, or it is absent. Sometimes it is an obvious fact. Thus it may be obvious that we share this or that belief with certain others. We believe in a deity, and so do they. We believe in survival of death, and so do they. And so on. But there are less obvious sorts of overlap that may require a certain amount of teasing out to become apparent and that are quite interesting. For example, there might be agreement that somehow and in some way or other, the universe, or the forces that operate within it, are morally positive or that "reality itself is committed to morality in some deep way."[3] Such agreement might not be so obvious—not least because of disagreement about, say, the nature of any such putative forces or about what is morally positive about them or about the character of the relevant deep commitment to morality. That others have (or, for that matter, do not have) truths of their own is perhaps a fact of the matter that is less likely to be obvious, at least to us. For one thing, if their truths were obvious to us, what would make those truths theirs rather than ours?

2. However, the issue is complicated, and I would not want to put much weight on this thought about the relationship between, on the one hand, believing that there is overlap between our views and those of another tradition and, on the other hand, believing that they have truths of their own. There are many considerations that might be relevant. For example, we might have a perspective on a particular group that would account for their sharing some of our beliefs but create no space at all for their having any true beliefs of their own. Thus we might see them as part of our history and as superseded by us, with anything that is good about them preserved in what we have to offer, so that when you subtract from what is valuable about them everything that we have retained, there is nothing of value left. In such cases, the fact that they did not move with us when the supersessionary stage was reached may make it seem less likely that there is anything to be learned from them. This fatal flaw may discredit them in our eyes. Or to take things in another direction, our perspective on another tradition may be that they are a derivative offshoot from our tradition and that what they have that is of value was taken with them when they left, properly speaking remains ours, and in no way suggests that there is anything we could learn from them. In such cases, the very fact that they have gone off on their own makes it seem unlikely that there is anything to be learned from them. *This* fatal flaw may discredit them in our eyes. As I say, there are many relevant considerations, and the topic is worthy of further exploration. It is a topic that has considerable application to historical cases, and in pondering it, we might consider, say, Muslim attitudes to Judaism and Christianity or to the Bah'ai faith, Christian attitudes to Judaism or Mormonism, and so forth, not to mention attitudes that are expressed intratraditionally, such as those of Anglicans to Methodists, of Catholics to Protestants, or of Sunnis to Shiites. Thanks to Jerome Gellman for helpful observations on these matters.

3. For reflection on the latter notion, see George I. Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in Robert Audi and William Wainwright, eds., *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 213–226. The quoted phrase is on p. 220.

L concerns our attitude to others and how we respond to them, and there will certainly be a fact of the matter with respect to whether we have the openness to others that is characteristic of L, and to which others we have it, even if we may not always be the best judges in our own case.

A Few Examples

Here are a few examples of these themes. The Islamic view of other theistic religions seems to include the notion of overlap. Muslims say that Jews and Christians are "people of the book." They are, according to Muslims, getting a lot right. For example, Muslims say that Jews and Christians have recognized many of the prophets. Muslims contend that non-Muslims have misrepresented or misunderstood the revelations they have received. Still, Jews and Christians are understood by Muslims to recognize certain things that Muslims also recognize. Perhaps the issue of how these Muslim claims are best characterized depends on how much the people of the book are taken to be getting right. Thus, if the people of the book are understood to score highly overall in terms of truth, perhaps this is an inclusivist position.

Perhaps IT2 and L are being hinted at in these moving lines from "This Is My Song" by Lloyd Stone (courtesy of the Lorenz Publishing Company):

> This is my song, O God of all the nations
> A song of peace, for lands afar and mine
> This is my home, the country where my heart is
> Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine
> But other hearts in other lands are beating
> With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

If the hopes and dreams of others are as true as mine, probably we would benefit from learning about their hopes and dreams.

And consider these remarks from the Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," which pertains to Hinduism, Buddhism, and other non-Christian religions:

> [There] is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. . . . The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, *though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds*

> *and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men*. (My emphasis)[4]

In commenting on the section of the Declaration that includes these remarks, J. A. DiNoia says:

> [This Declaration takes] up in turn the doctrines of the Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Judaic communities at least in a general way . . . [and approves] of the truth and rightness expressed in their beliefs and precepts. . . . As it happens, the doctrines whose truth and rightness it acknowledges turn out to be identical with Christian doctrines. [It] does not state that any strictly alien religious claims are true and right, but neither does it exclude this possibility. (*The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective*, 29)

It seems to me, though, that the latter part of the remarks I quoted from the Declaration, in particular, is more positive than DiNoia acknowledges. The first part of this passage seems to express the idea of overlap. Various peoples are said to perceive—and presumably to recognize and acknowledge—part of what the church takes itself to know to be the case. The italicized part, on the other hand, seems to express IT2. This is so, at any rate, assuming that the following two conditions are met. First, the teachings of other traditions that are true are not already believed by the church or implicit in what the church says. That is, those teachings represent something new, as far as the current teachings of the church are concerned. Something along these lines seems to be suggested by the remark that the teachings in question differ in many aspects from what the church holds and sets forth. Second, these teachings are understood *to be true* in virtue of reflecting "a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men." And this seems to be the most natural way to read these remarks. For the teachings in question appear to be among the elements in other religions that are also said to be true (and holy). So it seems to me that these remarks insinuate that there are alien religious claims that are true.

Interestingly, DiNoia's own assessment, both of the possibility that others may have truths of their own and of the possibility that we might learn from them, is actually more positive than the position that he finds in the Declaration and hence serves to illustrate nicely the main themes in this section:

> Faith in God's all-embracing providential care for the human race would seem to require of Christian communities that they admit that their

4. *Nostra Aetate* ("Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions"), proclaimed by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965; www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

> own traditions could not have a monopoly on religious truth and virtue. Charity and justice demand that Christians appreciate the goodness of other religious people; the truth of their doctrines about God, the human condition, and other matters. . . . Furthermore, respect for the truth that may be present in other religions implies a readiness to make it one's own. A willingness to appropriate the truths learned in the course of study and dialogue can be shown to be consistent with Christian doctrines about other religions and is in any case well attested by historical precedents. (DiNoia, 32–33)

The last few sentences here ("readiness to make it one's own," "willingness to appropriate") seem to assert explicitly that others have truths of their own and to express a willingness to learn such truths from others.

A Few Varieties

Both IT2 and L admit of degrees and can take various forms. Let's try to lay some of these out systematically. First, the *may* in IT2 ("others *may* be right about beliefs that we do not hold") can do with clarification. What is involved could range from recognizing some remote possibility that others have true beliefs that we have not recognized to our being confident that this is so.

Second, there is the question of how extensive we judge to be the truths that others possess and that we might therefore learn from them. Do we think that with their help we might add ever so slightly to our beliefs, or do we think it possible that we might learn a lot from them?

Third, there is the issue of how many others are relevant, the issue of scope. Are we open to learning something from, say, only one or two major traditions, perhaps those that resemble ours or that share with us something of a common history? Or are we open to learning something from any of the major current global traditions?

Fourth, are we open to learning from others about important matters or only about unimportant matters? We could be closed concerning what we take to be all the really important religious truths but open with respect to those that are less weighty. This may even be a fairly common combination.

Fifth, the truths in question may or may not be manifestly religious. For example, the truths that outsiders make available might concern, say, the psychological benefits of engaging in meditative techniques that one can employ without endorsing any explicitly religious beliefs. Practices of various sorts may be adopted from others for reasons that are not explicitly religious—such as that they promise personal enrichment of some sort. And concluding that such practices are beneficial obviously may not require any acknowledgment that the

specifically religious beliefs of those from whom we acquire them are true.[5] No doubt what I am alluding to is a process of learning from others that occurs frequently in a diverse society, probably often going unnoticed. To be open to others even in this simple practical respect is, however, quite significant. Indeed, this possibility of learning from other traditions about matters that are not manifestly religious opens up a vast area of inquiry, one with great potential for better relations among the traditions. This is an area in which all of the traditions can easily take an open, curious, and exploratory approach to each other.

Sixth, there is the question whether any truths that others are aware of, but our group is currently unaware of, are to be understood as somehow already present in, implicit in, or owned by our tradition. Clark Pinnock writes as follows:

> Recognizing truth in other religions does not take any glory away from Christ. For if all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hid in him, the truth anyone possesses is a facet of the truth in Jesus. (*A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*, 139)

Pinnock is saying that if there are truths in other religions, they are, in effect, Christian.[6] A closely related idea is that there is a revelatory package that our group has received, some of the contents of this package have not yet been accessed, but these contents can be accessed with the help of others.[7] Even here

5. Here are a couple of examples, more or less randomly selected. Suppose that there is a religious tradition that observes a day each year on which it is a solemn religious duty to ask formally for forgiveness from family or friends you may have offended, intentionally or unintentionally, during the previous year, or suppose that a tradition has formal occasions on which loved ones who have died are commemorated. Traditions that entirely lack such practices but recognize their value once exposed to them might take them on board without thereby making any other modifications in their beliefs and, in particular, without endorsing any of the explicitly religious beliefs of the donor tradition. Examples can be multiplied.

6. Another example: Richard J. Plantinga writes as follows about Justin Martyr, a second-century Christian apologist: "His general strategy is to argue that, although Christianity is *the* truth, there is also truth in the non-Christian world. . . . Glimpses of the truth that are expressed by the philosophers arise from their discovery and contemplation of some part of the *logos*. . . . These partial truths, Justin argues, really belong to Christians, who have the full truth." See Richard J. Plantinga, "God So Loved the World: Theological Reflections on Religious Plurality in the History of Christianity," in David W. Baker, ed., *Biblical Faith and Other Religions: An Evangelical Assessment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 106–137, 109.

7. Paul J. Griffiths (in his *Problems of Religious Diversity*, especially 62–63) is helpful on this topic. Actually, Griffiths uses the term *open inclusivism* to refer to the view that the truths we can learn from outsiders are already implicit in our tradition. (And he is favorably disposed to open inclusivism, so construed.) If we proceed in this way, there would then be the possibility of an even more open form of inclusivism that would allow that we can learn something that was *not* already implicit in our tradition.

there are various cases to distinguish. It might be that with time, effort, or training (etc.), we could discover on our own the as-yet undiscovered contents, and what others do is make the process of discovery more efficient. On the other hand, others might hold the vital key, without access to which the relevant contents may not be accessible at all.

Seventh, the unique claims of others might concern matters about which we already hold beliefs, so that what we learn from them would supplement the beliefs we already hold about these matters. Or those claims might instead concern entire areas with respect to which we have no beliefs at all. Others may have been interested in, or preoccupied by, issues or areas of inquiry in which we have been less interested, or not interested at all. One can imagine that, say, traditions that have faced entirely different historical circumstances would have focused attention on quite different concerns. For example, the challenges of poverty and the challenges of affluence are somewhat different, just as the challenges of pastoral peoples and those of urban peoples are somewhat different. Traditions might even think in terms of something like a division of labor in this regard: others' very different historical circumstances might be thought to have elicited sensitivities and discoveries to which one's own tradition has remained oblivious.

Eighth, in addition to being open to acquiring beliefs from others, thereby supplementing the beliefs we already hold, we might also be open to revising or even rejecting a belief in light of our encounter with others, in the extreme case adopting instead one or more of their beliefs. This would involve acknowledging the possibility that others may be right and *we may be wrong* about something. Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi in the United Kingdom, hints at this notion of a willingness to revise in these inspiring remarks from his book *The Dignity of Difference*:

> [Each] of us within our own traditions, religious or secular, must learn to listen and be prepared to be surprised by others. We must make ourselves open to their stories, which may profoundly conflict with ours. . . . We must learn the art of conversation, from which truth emerges not, as in Socratic dialogues, by the refutation of falsehood but from the quite different process of letting our world be enlarged by the presence of others who think, act, and interpret reality in ways radically different from our own. (*The Dignity of Difference* [London: Continuum, 2002], 23)

To be open to stories that profoundly conflict with ours may involve being open to some modifications of our antecedently held beliefs in light of what we learn from others.

Ninth, the enlargement of our world might take a different course. And here we deviate a little from probing variations of IT2 and of L to considering a related

possibility, a related sort of openness. Even if one would not be open to acquiring one or more additional beliefs from others, one might be open to deriving from one or more other traditions a fresh perspective, a new appreciation, or a deeper insight into beliefs we already hold.[8] This is another very interesting area of inquiry. One of the many possibilities in this area is that a tradition may be open to being enhanced by having perspectives and beliefs that it already endorses rendered more meaningful, tangible, powerful, or the like by virtue of the way in which they are presented or illustrated by another tradition.

When we consider all of these varieties, we have a very large spectrum of possibilities along the following lines. At one end, there is some slight openness to the possibility that some others see some things that we do not see or have a different perspective on what we both see, as well as some slight willingness to learn something relatively unimportant from those others. At the other end, there is a robust degree of openness both to others having truths of their own and to learning from them. This would probably be given expression in an enthusiastic, vigorous, curious, and exploratory investigation of many other traditions in a search for deeply important truths, an investigation that is conducted in a spirit of discovery and accompanied even by a willingness to revise what one has antecedently believed. In the latter case, many other traditions would be seen as storehouses of wisdom from which it may be possible to learn a lot. We take others very seriously indeed if we see them as likely possible sources of new beliefs on anything like this scale. So openness can range from being slight to being robust.

The Case for Openness

I regard the openness under discussion as an essential ingredient in any satisfactory response to others. Needless to say, however, this is a vague statement since, as we have just seen, the openness in question comes in umpteen shapes and sizes.

An arrangement in which we are open to learning from others and they are open to learning from us may appeal to some in some traditions for the following reason. We may feel that if there is fair and open competition in this regard, with everyone having access to central aspects of other religious traditions, and in particular if others have access to what we regard as the highly attractive aspects of

8. "Taking notice of the doctrines of other religious communities and developing doctrines about their doctrines may suggest some reappraisals of a community's primary doctrines and stimulate new understandings of their meaning and scope. . . . Christians should be open to possible developments of their own doctrines that might be suggested in the course of their study of other religions and in dialogue with their adherents" (DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions*, 26, 31).

our tradition, our tradition will come out ahead and be vindicated in the face of the competition, emerging as the tradition that is most worthwhile, most worthy of loyalty, and so on, and be recognized as such by all comers. So L may be considered attractive for a reason such as this.[9]

More important, though, is a line of thought that has to do with the caliber of those who hold views that we do not hold. In particular, the beliefs from which we might learn something are held by people who are intelligent, honest, and insightful; by people who reason with as much care as they can; and so forth—in short, by people of integrity. The fact that views that differ from, or are even opposed to, ours have had a central place in enduring cultures whose members include many people of integrity strongly suggests that there may be something valuable or worthwhile about those views. We ought to respect the rationality and seriousness of people of this caliber. The respect for others in question is a matter of respecting them as people who probably have been responsible in the ways in which they have acquired and maintained whatever beliefs they hold that are relevant to religion. Of course, there is no suggestion here that we should willy-nilly endorse the views of others, either in part or as a whole. The point is rather that a way to give expression to the respect that such people are owed is to be open to learning something from them. What we have here is a line of reasoning that speaks in favor of openness to others having true beliefs of their own and to learning from them.

A closely related point is that among the processes and strategies we use in acquiring and testing our beliefs is the strategy of relying on the views of those who seem to be reliable. In almost every area of our lives, we have no choice but to rely on the testimony of others. Broadly speaking, people of integrity deserve to be included in the category of those who seem to be reliable. If so, it seems reasonable to think that those who can best lay claim to being reliable are to be found among religious thinkers of many major enduring religious communities. But if so, the relevant people to whom we should listen are deeply divided, and there are many points of view to which we should pay attention and from which we should be open to learning. It is easy to see how unsatisfactory it would be in other fields of enquiry in which there are different positions on central issues, were one group to refuse to see what they could learn from others. This applies in medicine, literary criticism, psychology, physics, and philosophy, for example. The expectation in the area of religion is not that each group would treat others as being on a par with it. Rather, the claim is that there is something wrong with treating other religions as so far below par that we think we have nothing to learn from them.

9. Of course, people may miscalculate in this regard. Quite the reverse may occur in the wake of extensive mutual exposure, and members of our group may be drawn to one or more other traditions. What seems to be a fairly widespread unwillingness to experiment in this area probably bespeaks an inchoate awareness of the risks.

No doubt, whether a religious group will be open to learning something from others will depend on numerous factors. These will include their history of interaction with others, whether they feel defensive or beleaguered, whether openness to learning is something that broadly speaking is encouraged among them, which particular voices are influential at the time that this becomes an issue, and more besides.

Exclusivists will contend that nothing that is to be found uniquely in other religions is of any real religious significance. They may reason that the world—or however everything outside their tradition is conceived of—is a hopeless and misleading place and that there is nothing to be learned from outsiders. I do not think that it is possible to show such views to be mistaken. But there is a case for openness that challenges this view. Later, we will further strengthen this case. However, I see no way to be precise about how robust the relevant openness should be, and I will settle for saying that when all relevant considerations are adduced, a case can be made for a fairly robust form of openness.

How Is Inclusivism (about Truth) Best Understood?

Given what we have seen so far, there are various ways in which we might interpret inclusivism. Let's consider some options. We started with the idea that what matters is just the extent to which the views of others are true and the extent to which we outperform them in this regard:

> IT1. Others do fairly well overall in terms of truth, and we are only somewhat better off than they are in this regard.

As we have seen, if others do well in terms of truth, this is either because they share many of our truths or because they have many truths of their own, in which case we may be able to learn from them. Or both. Hence to consider the extent to which others are correct is just to consider the extent to which their beliefs overlap with ours and the extent to which they have true beliefs of their own. So far, then, the list of relevant factors, with respect to which there can be considerable variation in our judgments about others are these:

> The extent to which our tradition outperforms other traditions in terms of truth
> The extent to which our beliefs and those of others overlap
> The extent to which others may be correct about beliefs we do not hold
> The extent to which we are open to learning from others

We might think in terms of assigning to a tradition a score in each of these areas and then deriving an overall score that would combine these disparate elements.

For this to be feasible, the various factors must be commensurable with each other so that if, for example, another tradition lost points because it had little overlap with our views, it could gain points (on the same scale) because it has a significant number of truths of its own. Or greater openness on our part to learning from them could compensate for a lower assessment of the degree of overlap. And so on. And then we might think in terms of our being inclusivists with respect to another tradition when the overall score we assign to that tradition is above such and such a point.[10] Or we might require that a certain score in *each* of these four areas be thought by us to be achieved by the relevant others if we are to count as inclusivists. (Or both.)

Given everything we have seen, these are reasonable ways to understand inclusivism. But there are alternatives. Some alternatives consider one or two of the relevant factors I have just distinguished to be especially salient. Thus the proposal might be that we are inclusivists, provided that we acknowledge that there is extensive overlap between our views and those of others. In that case, any position that says that others recognize a significant number of our truths should be counted as a form of inclusivism about truth. Paul Griffiths more or less endorses this approach. As already mentioned, he says that inclusivism gets its name from the fact that it says that we include among our views whatever truths others espouse. He says that "the characteristic inclusivistic response to the question of truth . . . [is] that the home religion is at the top of a hierarchy of truth-telling religions: it includes their truths, if they teach any, in its truths, which is what provides the position's name" (*Problems of Religious Diversity*, 57).

However, there are other possible proposals that focus on a subset of the factors we have distinguished. We might consider the salient consideration to be the openness for which I made a case in the last section. In that case, exclusivism—even of the open sort—would have no space for others being right about beliefs we do not hold or for our learning anything from them. So one thing that exclusivism would exclude would be others having any truths of their own. And the only room it would have for others being right would be in virtue of their sharing some beliefs with us.

A modified version of this last proposal would have it that *open* exclusivism can accommodate a slight openness to others. This would be something modest like a slight openness to the possibility that others uniquely recognize some relatively unimportant truths and in turn to learning something modest from them.

10. Strictly speaking, what is relevant here is as much about us as it is about them. The fourth factor, in particular, has to do with how open we are to them in a certain respect. But for the sake of simplicity, I am presenting the issue in terms of assigning others a score. To say the least, though, the mechanics of combining such disparate elements are likely to be challenging. One relevant detail is that it will normally be an *increase* in our estimate of, say, the extent of overlap with another tradition that will increase the likelihood that we are inclusivists with respect to them. On the other hand, it will normally be a *decrease* in our estimate of the extent to which we outperform them in terms of truth that will make for our being inclusivists with respect to them.

And the idea would be that you have stepped over into inclusivism if you endorse something more robust—such as an expectation that others know about some significant matters that we do not know about. The reasoning would be, perhaps, that if exclusivists can acknowledge a considerable amount of overlap truth while remaining exclusivists, might they not also allow a little bit of unique truth on the part of others and still be (open) exclusivists? And if a modest openness to learning from others were compatible with (open) exclusivism, perhaps what would, so to speak, compensate for this openness, keeping us in the land of exclusivism, would be a low estimate of their overall success in terms of truth and of the extent to which their views overlap with ours and a high estimate of the extent to which we outperform them in terms of truth.[11]

Closed and Open Inclusivism

We might distinguish between closed and open inclusivism. One way to do so is proposed by Paul Griffiths. As mentioned, he thinks that a position is inclusivist in virtue of the element of overlap. Yet, surprising as it is at first glance, the space that he finds for a distinction between open and closed inclusivism has to do with the possibility of learning from others. His closed version says that we never learn anything from others, and his open version says that we can sometimes learn from others—although in the process all that occurs is that what already is part of our tradition (part of our package) is made explicit.

But there are many other possibilities and many other ways in which we might distinguish between open and closed inclusivism, including some that give expression to considerations already adduced. For example, we might make this distinction in terms of the overall score assigned to the relevant others when all of the various factors we have identified are taken into account. So a closed inclusivist view about another group would be that they score pretty well (but not that well, not outstandingly) on all four factors, taken cumulatively. An open inclusivistic view would be that they do even better than that—although still not as well as we do. Or a high score in all of these areas might be required.

Or, again, we might think that in this case there are one or two especially salient considerations. Thus a robust openness to learning from others might be

11. If exclusivism can be *really* open, we could even drop inclusivism and propose that open exclusivism occupies all of the space between closed exclusivism and pluralism. In that case, we might think of inclusivism solely as a view about salvation; at any rate, it would not be relevant with respect to truth. In that case, too, all of the issues that have surfaced as we have tried to clarify inclusivism might receive an airing in that context. But I do not see that anything would be gained by taking this approach. (Incidentally, in this note, I am writing as if our three options are exhaustive of the relevant possibilities, ignoring the possibility that there is a no-man's-land, or more than one, between the relevant positions.)

thought to be key. The idea might be that no matter how highly we rank a tradition in terms of the other relevant factors, only a high score in terms of this crucial factor yields open inclusivism. On this approach, closed and open inclusivism both share a certain type of appreciation for various other traditions. The relevant traditions are seen by the closed inclusivist to deserve credit for recognizing various truths (that we also recognize). This reflects well on those traditions. Open inclusivism would be especially positive in its assessment of the traditions that fall within its scope, taking the view that those traditions have arrived at important truths of which we are currently unaware and being open to learning such truths from them. They get extra credit for insights into matters of which our grasp is either less complete or entirely absent. Looked at from a theistic point of view, this is likely to play itself out in terms of an acknowledgment that the others in question have the same source of revelation that we have and that their revelation may supplement ours to some extent.

On any of these ways of giving traditions a score, it would be natural to expect that different traditions would score differently in the sense that some would do better than others. So it would not be surprising if we were, say, closed inclusivists about some traditions, open inclusivists about others, and not inclusivists at all in the case of yet others. Some of the ways of including others that have been mentioned—for example, judging that there is such and such a degree of overlap between our views and those of some particular other tradition—extend, as we have seen, just to the particular tradition in question. On the other hand, an all-embracing and unrestricted willingness to learn from others whatever there is to be learned from them, for example, need not be limited in its scope in this fashion.

To put a different spin on this issue of the scope of the relevant claim, in the process revisiting another familiar theme, the actual number of other traditions brought into the relevant fold might reasonably be thought to have a bearing on whether one is to be classified as an open inclusivist. The idea would be that the wider the scope and hence the more others are included, the more open the form of inclusivism.

Really, there are many equally good ways to proceed and many equally good ways to map the inclusivist terrain, and there is no obviously correct way to do so. There is no point in aiming for precision, either about the extent of the territory or about the lay of the land within it. There is no single way to get it right.

Concluding Thoughts

Before I started to try to find my way through these issues, I had encountered murmurs of dissatisfaction with the traditional trichotomy of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Now I think I see why. Or at any rate I see why such

murmurs are appropriate, at least with respect to truth. Should we ditch these terms entirely?

I don't think we should. Talk of exclusivism and inclusivism is not without meaning. (Later, I will turn to the case of pluralism.) There certainly is some connection between these terms and issues that really matter, both to ordinary people and to scholars, so it is not surprising that there has been much discussion of them. We can have more precision if we dig deeper and look independently at matters such as these: how much truth others are deemed to have, how much better than them in terms of truth we consider ourselves to be, how much overlap between our views and theirs we think there is, to what extent we judge them to have truths of their own, and, hence, to what extent we think we can learn from them. Each of these factors is a matter of degree. It would not be unreasonable to propose replacing talk of exclusivism and inclusivism with talk of these various respects in which we can evaluate other traditions, perhaps assigning a name to each of these factors and then thinking of the newly introduced terms as successor terms to the familiar terms, *exclusivism* and *inclusivism*. My preference is to see these traditional terms as loose approximations to various ways of combining the various factors that have been discussed—and perhaps other factors, too.

Here is an example of another such factor, one that we have already touched on briefly. We might see another tradition as a phase on the way to the development of our tradition, which is the most fully developed tradition, the tradition that does fully or most completely what others do partially and to a lesser extent. This evolutionary motif has it that one or more other traditions are anticipations of us. Some such talk (and especially the idea of doing fully what others do partially) may pertain to salvation rather than to truth, and I will revisit its application to the issue of salvation at the appropriate point. But here I am considering it as a view about truth. As such, it seems, for instance, to be the attitude of the Baha'i faith to the various religious traditions that preceded the emergence of Baha'i. While it would be unreasonable to think of this evolutionary motif as a prerequisite for a position being classified as inclusivistic, it is an element whose presence probably counts in favor of the general position of which it is a part being classified as inclusivistic. And there may be others.

Actually, this evolutionary element may be formulated in subtly different ways. A tradition that sees another tradition as a stage on the way to itself—perhaps even seeing the beliefs of the other tradition as a stage on the way to the articulation of its own currently held beliefs—may hold that the relevant claims of the tradition in question are generally false in spite of their evolutionary significance. If they are generally taken to be false, that would, I suppose, put an exclusivistic spin on the evolutionary idea.

Or the idea may be that other traditions have truths that were, somehow or other, appropriate for the time and place in which they were originally enunciated.

(Perhaps the relevant traditions now retain them inappropriately and beyond their expiration date.) Michael Cook writes as follows of the details of prior revelations from a Qur'anic point of view:

> [According to the] Koranic view of history . . . [while successive] messengers arrive with the same doctrinal message . . . [there is] a certain ringing of changes with regard to the outward form and precise content of the messages. . . . [The] various revealed books, while of course confirming each other in general terms, may differ significantly in points of detail. . . . God tells Muhammad that "to every term there is a book" . . . that is, each age has its scripture; in it God erases or confirms what He pleases. . . . [The] content of revelation is liable to change from one prophetic epoch to another. (*Muhammad* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 42)

If this idea of different truths for different times were endorsed in a thoroughgoing way, this would, in effect, be to give the evolutionary motif a pluralistic spin. (More on pluralism anon.)

To conclude, the key idea in inclusivism is this: having space for others and not using up all of the available oxygen, so to speak, or imagining that we could. It may involve the idea that the truths of others are included among our truths. It may also involve the idea that their tradition is included among those that have some true beliefs of their own, with the attendant idea that we might learn from them. Perhaps it involves the evolutionary idea that the views of others are part of our history, or part of the history of our repository of beliefs. The term i*nclusivism* does not itself tell us what it is that one is being included in, what it takes to be included, or who is being included.

4

Exclusivism about Salvation

The most natural way to understand exclusivism on the matter of salvation is, I think, to take it to be the combination of the following two claims:

ES1 Our tradition alone delivers salvation.
ES2 Only members of our tradition can achieve salvation.

ES1 says that ours is the tradition whose mechanisms, whatever they may be, make it possible to achieve salvation. It is the only vehicle, the only means, to salvation.

I am construing the notion, central to ES1, of being the only tradition that delivers salvation in a broad way. It may be that the tradition does not understand *itself* to deliver salvation but rather conceives of salvation as something that is, say, bestowed by God. For example, many, if not all, Christians would consider it to be a serious misrepresentation to say that it is their tradition as such that makes it possible to achieve salvation. However, their view would be, first, that there are aspects of reality or mechanisms that make salvation possible and that their tradition describes these aspects of reality or mechanisms, and their significance, more completely and more accurately than does any other tradition. Their view would also be, second, that these aspects of reality or mechanisms are somehow uniquely associated with their tradition, internal to it and owned by it in some sense or another. I am construing the claim that our tradition alone delivers salvation in a broad way so that it includes cases in which the two views I have just mentioned are endorsed.

ES2 says that only members of our tradition can be the beneficiaries of whatever vehicle delivers salvation. A position may not sensibly be classified as exclusivism unless it excludes. And exclusivism about salvation will count as such only if it excludes some people, probably many people, from salvation, which ES2 certainly does. However, ES2 says nothing at all about how many (if any) members of our tradition *do* achieve salvation. Thus ES2 is consistent with, and may sometimes coexist with, complete uncertainty on our part about this matter or even with pessimism in this regard, where this would involve something along

the lines of an expectation that very few members of our tradition would achieve salvation. In addition, ES2 is consistent with its being the case that people who are not members of our tradition can achieve salvation—but only in the sense that they can do so if they become members of our tradition.

Exactly what membership requires and involves can vary considerably. The best way to approach this issue, I think, is just to say that what membership requires and involves in the case of any particular tradition is what that tradition considers it to require and involve. It might require, for example, taking part in some sort of initiation ceremony, regularly participating in various rituals, or in some other way explicitly and publicly indicating one's belonging. It might require mutual recognition of membership on the part of other actual members. It might require having gone through a private change of heart or coming to hold certain beliefs, these being matters that others, including other members, may not be privy to. Membership might even be thought to require being a recipient of a certain divine grace or to require having received salvation. And *these* are matters that a possible member may be uncertain about even in her own case.

Let's refer to ES1 and ES2, respectively, as *exclusivism about the means of salvation* and *exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation*. Exclusivism about salvation combines both of these. It says both that our tradition is the only good one in a particular respect and that its members alone are privileged in a particular respect. It alone can deliver salvation, and its members alone can achieve salvation.

Exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation does not explicitly exclude the possibility that there is more than one means to salvation. It says that members of our tradition alone are the beneficiaries of whatever means there may be. So ES2 is consistent with there being a curious arrangement in which traditions other than ours deliver salvation—but only for us. Exclusivism about salvation, the combination of ES1 and ES2, rules out this curious possibility: it does so just because it includes ES1.[1]

There are, as I shall discuss, plenty of people who endorse exclusivism about the means while rejecting exclusivism about the beneficiaries.[2] (Everyone who satisfies this description should, I think, be classified as an inclusivist.) Indeed, strictly speaking, not only is exclusivism about the means consistent with a

1. Incidentally, I am aware that, at a stretch, ES1 could be read as saying that membership in our tradition is required for salvation. Indeed, I have noticed that some people interpret ES1 in this way, especially on encountering it, and the associated issues, for the first time. That membership in our tradition is required for salvation, however, is what is expressed by ES2, and ES1 has no such implication.

2. As a foretaste of things to come in this regard, consider this remark from C. S. Lewis: "We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know him can be saved through Him" (*Mere Christianity* [San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001], 64). This may combine an acceptance of ES1 with a rejection of, or at any rate a failure to endorse, ES2.

rejection of exclusivism about the beneficiaries: exclusivism about the means is even consistent with universalism about salvation, which is just the view that everyone will achieve salvation.

On the other hand, although one could consistently endorse exclusivism about the beneficiaries without endorsing, and even while denying, exclusivism about the means, this would be—as I indicated in the paragraph before last—a curious combination of views. So it is not surprising that few have endorsed this particular combination. Indeed, it may be that no one has ever done so. Certainly, those who believe that only members of their tradition can achieve salvation typically also believe that what accounts for this being the case is the fact that (as they see it) their tradition alone delivers salvation. Chances are, then, that anyone who endorses exclusivism about the beneficiaries is a full-blown exclusivist about salvation.

Exclusivism about the beneficiaries makes reference to members of our tradition. Now it is conceivable that someone might—for who knows what reason—count everyone who has ever existed as a member of his tradition. If so, such a person might, in turn, endorse ES2 and take it to mean that everyone who has ever existed can achieve salvation. Perhaps such a person should not be classified as an exclusivist; perhaps this would be pluralism about salvation or a version or, more likely, an aspect thereof. The problem here, if there is one, is easily solved. One way to do so is just to assume that ES2 involves a notion of membership that excludes some and probably many. Hence someone who counts everyone as a member of his tradition is not actually subscribing to ES2—even if he seems to be doing so. Such a person is not an exclusivist about the beneficiaries and hence is not an exclusivist (about salvation) *simpliciter*. I am inclined to take this approach since my main interest is in the actually existing major religions and not in possible nonexistent religions—such as an imaginary religion that counts everyone who has ever existed as a member. And the major global traditions generally have notions of membership that exclude many. There are members who are in and outsiders who are out. An alternative approach—that is, an alternative way to ensure that the views under discussion that do not seem exclusivistic are not classified as such—would be to allow that such a person *is* subscribing to ES2 but to add that there is a third claim (in addition to ES1 and ES2) to which all exclusivists about salvation also subscribe, such as the claim that that many, perhaps most, people will not achieve salvation—even if everyone *can* do so.

Exclusivism about salvation (which is, recall, the combination of exclusivism about the means of salvation and exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation) is closely related to what I called (in chapter 2) "exclusivism about the truth about salvation":

> ET2 We are right about salvation, and all other traditions are wrong in their claims in this area.

But these positions are distinct. An advocate of ET2 might, for example, be a universalist about salvation who believes that all outsiders will achieve salvation as a result of a process over which our tradition claims ownership. (This is one of the claims that, in accordance with ET2, he believes himself to be right about.) However, someone can, of course, consistently be both an exclusivist about the truth about salvation and an exclusivist about salvation. This is just to say that someone who is an exclusivist about the truth about salvation may believe that the truth about salvation is just what ES1 and ES2 say it to be. Indeed, many people believe this to be so with respect to their own tradition.

Belief and Salvation

Belief of some sort is often understood to be required for salvation. Let's refer to the assumption that belief is so required as the *belief requirement*. So the belief requirement says:

> ES3 Belief (of some specified sort or another) is necessary for salvation.

In any case in which ES3 is actually proposed, it will naturally involve a statement of *which* beliefs must be held if salvation is to be achieved. Sometimes, for example, the following type of claim is made by exclusivists:

> ES4 Belief that our tradition alone makes salvation possible is necessary for salvation.

For example, there are Christians who contend that the belief that salvation can be found through Jesus alone is necessary for salvation. That is, they contend that holding this particular belief—that salvation can be found through Jesus alone—is necessary for salvation.

ES4 would explain why ES2 (exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation) is true, for only members of our tradition will have the belief mentioned in ES4 with respect to our tradition. If ES2 is true, there must be *something* that makes it true, and ES4 certainly is one possibility.

Obviously, it may not be the particular belief alluded to in ES4—namely, the belief that only one's own tradition makes salvation possible—that is understood to be required for salvation. What is understood to be required may be this belief combined with one or more other beliefs, or it may be other beliefs entirely. Or what is understood to be required may be belief in all or most of the central or most important tenets of one's tradition or belief in some subset of these most central and important tenets. ES4 is, therefore, a special case of ES3, the belief requirement.

The beliefs in question may all be such that only members of our tradition (the tradition from within which exclusivism is being stated) would hold them. Or they may include beliefs that are held as well by outsiders or by some outsiders. For example, the beliefs in question might include the belief that there is a deity and the belief that the deity has some standard theistic properties—beliefs, in short, about which there is considerable agreement among the theistic traditions. There is nothing problematic about such a case. It merely illustrates the point—and it is one to which exclusivists about salvation need not object—that nonmembers can satisfy a necessary condition of salvation.

When you add the belief requirement (ES3) to the combination of ES1 and ES2—or, more precisely, when you add a statement that exemplifies ES3 and that indicates which particular beliefs must be held if salvation is to be achieved—what you then have may be thought of as a particular variety of exclusivism about salvation. In that case, there would be at least as many varieties as there are statements of the belief requirement.

However, to revisit a theme touched on in the first section of this chapter, there may be instances in which the inclusion of the belief requirement is not best thought of as modifying the exclusivism with which we began, but rather as a way to understand it. I have in mind cases in which holding certain beliefs is understood to be partially, or even entirely, definitive of membership in our tradition, so that if you do not hold the beliefs in question, you are not a member of our tradition. In that case, ES2 already implicitly contains a form of the belief requirement, and we do not add an additional requirement by making it explicit. As mentioned, however, religious traditions vary with respect to the extent to which they consider belief to be a requirement of membership.[3]

Yet another possibility in this general area is that the belief requirement, or a particular statement thereof, would be thought to be what exclusivism about salvation consists in. For example, J. A. Dinoia characterizes exclusivism as "the view that salvation requires explicit faith in Christ prior to death" (*The Diversity of Religions*, ix), and he means, of course, to define Christian exclusivism. Exclusivism, understood in this way, would presumably entail ES1 and, depending on the relevant notion of membership that is involved, may also entail ES2.

3. A further complication here arises from the fact that, as mentioned, membership may actually be understood to require salvation. That is, being a member may be understood in a kingdom-not-of-this-world sort of way so that one is a member only if one has achieved salvation. In that case, while it would be true that

ES2 Only members of our tradition can achieve salvation,

this would be so in virtue of the fact that to be a member *is* to achieve salvation. (Thanks to Aaron Vaidan for some observations about these matters.)

The belief requirement is quite different from the view that belief (of some sort or another) is *sufficient* for salvation, although these views certainly are sometimes found together. If belief of some sort is understood by an *exclusivist* to be sufficient for salvation, it must be belief that is uniquely held by members of the tradition in which alone salvation is understood by the exclusivist to be found.[4] More broadly, any condition that an exclusivist will take to suffice for salvation must be such that it can be satisfied only by a member of the exclusivist's tradition. Someone who thinks that a sufficient condition of salvation can be met by an outsider is not an exclusivist. She may be an inclusivist or a pluralist, depending on what else she says.[5]

The claim that belief, or any other condition or state of affairs, is sufficient for salvation is compatible with there being other factors, too, that are sufficient for salvation. Indeed, strictly speaking, it is compatible with there being in everyone's case some condition that obtains or some mechanism that is relevant and that, in every case, suffices for their salvation, which is just to say that it is compatible with universalism about salvation.[6]

4. Actually, this requires qualification. If there is a set of beliefs whose possession, as a whole, is understood by an exclusivist to be sufficient for salvation, that set may include some beliefs that are not uniquely held by members of that tradition in which alone salvation is understood by the exclusivist to be found. But there must be other beliefs within that set that are uniquely held by members of the tradition in question, so that the set as a whole is uniquely held by members of that tradition.

5. Here is a point to keep in mind while considering these matters. Someone who says that holding certain beliefs is necessary or sufficient for salvation may be assuming that if someone holds the beliefs in question, they will, as a matter of fact, also satisfy various other conditions. There are various possibilities: adhering to certain moral standards, submission to one or more relevant authorities, participation in certain ceremonies or rituals or other observances, and so on. Or the assumption might be that only someone who is a direct recipient of divine grace of a certain sort would hold the relevant beliefs. The result is that discussion of holding the relevant beliefs and of the significance of doing so may serve as shorthand for discussion of a broader set of conditions. So when it is said that holding certain beliefs is either a necessary or sufficient condition of salvation, there may actually be a complex set of connections here to be unpacked.

6. It might be suggested that if universalism is true, then there would not be much point in observing that holding any particular belief—or, more broadly, satisfying any particular condition—is sufficient for salvation. (If all roads are believed to lead to Sligo, what is the point of asserting that *this* road leads to Sligo?) Still, particular ways to salvation might be more suitable for particular individuals for any number of reasons, such as psychological makeup, personal history, cultural context, or the like. (Even if all roads lead to Sligo, there might be reasons to point someone in the direction of a particular road, such as the fact that it fits better with her tastes, interests, proclivities, memories, and so forth.) Incidentally, the claim that belief is sufficient for salvation should not be taken to mean that salvation is produced by belief per se. Divine agency, or some corresponding mechanism, would presumably need to be combined with belief. The idea might be along these lines in the case of the theistic traditions: God bestows salvation in response to belief. The reading of "sufficient condition" that is involved here has two components. First, a sufficient condition of X's occurring is any condition such that if it obtains, it follows that X obtains. So there is an if-then element involved. If someone believes, then he will be, or is, saved. The second component is that a sufficient condition is somehow causally relevant to the occurrence of X or at the very least is the occasion thereof. So,

Some Examples

Exclusivism about salvation is quite common. It has motivated, sometimes in combination with other factors, much missionary activity throughout the world on the part of a number of traditions.[7] Here are some examples of these themes. A prayer booklet issued a few years ago by Southern Baptists in the United States at the time of Diwali, the Hindu "Festival of Lights," probably bespeaks exclusivism about salvation. It says that Hindus worship "gods which are not God" and that Hindus have "darkness in their hearts that no lamp can dispel." The booklet asks Christians to pray for the residents of various Indian cities, commenting thus on some of these cities: "Mumbai is a city of spiritual darkness. Eight out of every ten people are Hindu, slaves bound by fear and tradition to false gods and goddesses. . . . Satan has retained his hold on Calcutta through Kali and other gods and goddesses of Hinduism. It's time for Christ's salvation to come to Calcutta."[8]

The remark that Hindus have "darkness in their hearts that no lamp can dispel," in addition to being an unfortunate gibe on the occasion of Diwali, and one that led to Hindu protests in India and elsewhere, probably indicates that some Southern Baptists believe that Hindus, at any rate, are not going to achieve salvation. Not at any rate if they remain Hindu. To be sure, the notion of having darkness in one's heart does not interpret itself (though it seems less than entirely laudatory) and does not explicitly mention salvation. It might be a matter of having limited knowledge, for example. Perhaps one could even believe that people can be saved while remaining in the darkness in question. And these remarks concern Hindus and not non-Christians in general. Still, it seems reasonable to say that there are, at any rate, strong hints of exclusivism both about

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for example, belief is thought by some to have a causal role of some sort in the occurrence of salvation. Belief can be sufficient in this sense—in the sense that involves these two components—even while it is not sufficient in another important sense. In this other sense, a sufficient condition of something amounts to everything that actually brings it about or is responsible for its existence or occurrence. If divine agency confers salvation—when there is belief of the right sort or when other conditions are met—then belief of the right sort (or whatever other conditions are relevant) is not sufficient in this other sense. So I am reading "sufficient condition" in the first of these ways. This reading may be a little unusual. More common, I think, is the notion of a sufficient condition as consisting solely in the if-then component, so that a sufficient condition of X's occurring is just any condition such that if it obtains, it follows that X obtains.

7. "Well into the middle ages and beyond . . . Christian doctrines about other religions were regularly invoked to clarify the point of its own central doctrines or to authorize vigorous and far-reaching missionary endeavors. The prominence of formulations asserting the supersession and fulfillment of other religions . . . along with generally negative assessments of other religions and convictions about the difficulty of attaining salvation without explicit faith lent considerable urgency to the Christian missionary enterprise" (DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions*, 23).

8. See http://hindunet.org/HPG.pdf.

the beneficiaries and about the means of salvation here. The Southern Baptist Convention has circulated similar prayer books aimed at Jews and Muslims. Actually, the overall situation seems to be that the members of this denomination generally believe in exclusivism about the means of salvation but disagree among themselves about exclusivism about salvation tout court, with some endorsing and some rejecting it.[9]

Sometimes the Roman Catholic strand within Christianity has appeared to endorse exclusivism about salvation, though this tradition appears to have gradually shifted in an inclusivist direction. The remark that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("Outside the church there is no salvation"), a statement that seems to be traced to Saint Cyprian of Carthage, a bishop of the third century, and that has been the subject of much discussion over the centuries, may combine exclusivism both about the means and about the beneficiaries, although it is anything but a remark that interprets itself. These remarks from the Council of Florence (1438–1445) may also give expression to this combination:

> [No] one remaining outside the Catholic church, not just pagans, but also Jews or heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life, but they will go to the "everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels" unless before the end of life they are joined to the church. (www.ewtn.com/library/councils/florence.htm)

Likewise for this remark from Pope Boniface VIII:

> We are required by faith to believe and hold that there is one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church; we firmly believe it and unreservedly profess it; outside it there is neither salvation nor remission of sins. (quoted by Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982], 10)

Dominus Iesus may endorse exclusivism about the *means* of salvation:

> There is only one salvific economy of the One and Triune God, realized in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of god, actualized with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit and extended in its salvific value to all humanity and to the entire universe: "No one, therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit." (section 12)

9. For some introductory discussion of this matter, in the course of which a number of perspectives receive examination, see the various essays in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2(2), 1998); www.sbts.edu/resources/category/journal-of-theology/sbjt-22-summer-1998/.

And exclusivism about the means of salvation also seems to be presented in the New Testament. Some of the relevant remarks are these:

> I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. (John 14: 6)

> And there is salvation through no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4: 12)

> For there is one God; . . . there is also one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all. (1 Timothy 2: 4–6)

The claim that belief—in this particular case, belief in Jesus—is necessary for salvation is made in the following remarks. Herman Otten, publisher of an unofficial Lutheran newspaper, *Christian News*, was quoted as follows in a recent newspaper article: "We don't hate the Muslims, the Jews, the Sikhs. We love them, therefore we want to let them know that they are lost, they are eternally lost, unless they believe in Jesus" ("Heresy Seen in Service for September 11," *New York Times*, February 8, 2002). Because of the content of the belief that is said to be required, what we find here is, in effect, a statement of the belief requirement that amounts to exclusivism about the beneficiaries. I take the *belief in* Jesus, of which Otten makes mention, to involve something along the lines of trust in Jesus combined with belief that various uniquely Christian beliefs about Jesus are true. So he is saying that *both* of these components are necessary for salvation.

When the belief requirement is stated, it is sometimes accompanied by an indication not only of which beliefs must be held but also of how they must be held. For example, the following remarks are from an encyclical issued by Pope Leo XIII on June 29, 1896: "[Jesus Christ] requires the assent of the mind to all truths without exception. It was thus the duty of all who heard Jesus Christ, if they wished for eternal salvation, not merely to accept his doctrine as a whole, but to assent with their entire mind to all and every point of it, since it is unlawful to withhold faith from God even in regard to one single point" (www.vatican.va/holy father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_1-xiii_enc_29061896_satis-cognitum_en.html, section 8). I take this not to mean that one must assent to all truths—a time-consuming and demanding endeavor if ever there was one—but rather that one must assent to all key teachings of the church, or something along these lines, and that one must do so wholeheartedly. A similarly demanding standard is specified by Abu Nabhan Jaid ibn Khamis al-Kharusi, an Ibadi Muslim scholar from Oman: "The people of the truth are the Ibadis—they are the people of straightness on the path, and their religion is the true one and their teaching is the truth. . . . Nonetheless only the sincere among them will be

saved. . . . There is no escaping from God's punishment *for anyone who disagrees with or is ignorant of a single letter of the true religion . . .*" (Quoted by Valerie Hoffman in "Ibadi Muslim Scholars and the Confrontation with Sunni Islam in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Zanzibar," *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 1:95, 2005. My emphasis).

Exclusivism about the beneficiaries that involves belief that is both uniquely held by members of the relevant tradition and that is understood to be sufficient for salvation seems to be expressed in these passages in the New Testament:

> For God so loved the world that He gave his only-begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through Him. (John 3: 16)

> [Everyone] who believes is put right with God. . . . If you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised him from death, you will be saved. For it is by our faith that we are put right with God; it is by our confession that we are saved. (Romans 10: 4, 9)

> He who believes in the Son has eternal life. . . . (John 3: 36)

This New Testament passage, too, seems to say that belief is sufficient for salvation, although the emphasis here is on *belief in* rather than belief that something is the case:

> He came to his own country, but his own people did not receive him. Some, however, did receive him and believed in him; so he gave them the right to become God's children. (John 1: 11–12)

And the following passage seems to say that belief is necessary, as well as sufficient:

> [Jesus] said to them, "Go throughout the whole world and preach the gospel to all mankind. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16: 16)

The Qu'ran also seems to have many clear statements to the effect that holding certain beliefs is necessary for salvation, including these:

> As for those who disbelieve in God's signs, for them awaits a terrible chastisement. (3, 1) (*The Koran Interpreted*, a translation by Arthur J. Arberry [Toronto: MacMillan, 1969])

> As for the unbelievers, their riches will not avail them . . . they shall be fuel for the Fire. . . . Say to the unbelievers: "You shall be overthrown, and mustered into Gehenna—an evil cradling." (3, 9)

> As for the unbelievers, I will chastise them with a terrible chastisement in this world and the next; they shall have no helpers. (3, 49)

Sometimes the belief that is taken to be necessary for salvation seems to be understood to include a willingness to acknowledge the prophethood of Muhammad.

There are also some Qu'ranic passages that suggest that what will result in condemnation is not unbelief per se but rather unbelief combined with a moral deficiency of some sort, in particular, an absence of righteousness and a preference for this world over the world to come. (Consider these passages, for example: "Surely the unbelievers, who have done evil, God would not forgive them, neither guide them on any road but the road to Gehenna, therein dwelling for ever and ever . . ." [4, 165]; "And woe to the unbelievers for a terrible chastisement, such as prefer the present life over the world to come . . ." [14, 3].) Perhaps the situation is that both belief in certain key doctrines *and* righteousness are taken to be necessary for salvation. Hence an absence of either, and perhaps all the more so an absence of both, will result in condemnation.

The following passage may specify a number of additional necessary conditions for salvation, in addition to belief and righteousness:

> Only he shall inhabit God's places of worship who believes in God and the Last Day, and performs the prayer, and pays the alms, and fears none but God alone. . . . (9, 18)

However, it may be that the additional requirements are to be understood as part of what righteousness consists in. And in some of these passages, *belief* (and *unbelief* and their cognates) may be serving as shorthand for a combination of belief and one or more other conditions, after the fashion mentioned previously.[10]

In addition, the position presented in the Qu'ran may be that, together, belief in certain key doctrines and righteousness are *sufficient* for salvation. This seems to be the import of these remarks:

> Surely those who believe and do deeds of righteousness—unto them the All-merciful shall assign love. (19, 95)

10. See n. 5.

> Those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness—theirs shall be forgiveness and general provision. (23, 49)[11]

Naturally, passages such as those I have quoted must in each case be interpreted within the context of the relevant text as a whole and of the relevant tradition as a whole. Nevertheless, such passages seem to lend themselves to being read in the ways that I have suggested. The onus is on those who contend otherwise to show that the quoted passages do not say what they appear to say. However, I do not mean to as much as suggest here that either the New Testament or the Qur'an as a whole, not to mention the relevant religious traditions taken as a whole, are best understood to endorse the views I have taken the quoted passages to express. (A reader who is puzzled by this remark may want to take a glance in advance at the inclusivist options discussed in the next chapter.)

It goes without saying that what position one takes on salvation, for example, and whether one is an exclusivist, an inclusivist, or something else entirely on this matter will be, in large part, a function of what other beliefs one holds. Such beliefs do not dangle unsupported on their own but rather are sustained by a web of other beliefs. For example, the various Christian positions taken on salvation are, in part, a function of the variety of views held by Christians on the nature of the atonement. In particular, those who think that the suffering of Jesus atoned for our sins, making it possible for us to be saved from their consequences, probably are somewhat more likely to be exclusivists than those who think that the sacrifice of Jesus is important because it captures the essence of what a person should be willing to do for others, shows victory over hatred, betokens the ultimate triumph of good over evil, or the like. That being said, the former option concerning the atonement hardly entails exclusivism; indeed, it is endorsed by many who reject exclusivism.

Assessment of Exclusivism about Salvation

I do not aim to give a comprehensive assessment of the merits of each of the responses to other traditions that I am distinguishing. Here I will just make a few observations about exclusivism about salvation, the first three of which are objections to this view.

11. For further investigation of these matters and an interpretation of Islam as fundamentally inclusivist on the matter of salvation, see Mohammad Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press).

First, exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation has a worrying feature. Salvation would be a benefit of no small significance. It would involve, presumably, being in as good a situation overall as one can be in, and it would last for a very long time and possibly forever. The worry arises from the fact that it is quite common for groups to believe that they are special in various respects, just as individuals are disposed to think that they are special. Religious groups in particular often think they are superior to other groups with respect to, say, their conduct, their ideals, the ways in which reason uniquely supports their views, the care with which they reason, the ways in which their religious perspective uniquely equips them to deal with significant areas of concern, or the like. Such views about one's own group promote solidarity and a sense of shared identity. But at least in the case of claims to be superior in the respects just mentioned, all of which have a this-worldly focus, there is some chance that the relevant claims can be assessed in the light of experience. We can review the conduct of the groups in question, both now and across their history, both when they have been relatively powerful and when they have been a relatively powerless and struggling minority. We can study and assess the care with which they reason about their beliefs, both at present and across their history. Consequently, the claim that one's group does best in the relevant respect is one that can be assessed and runs the risk of being refuted by the historical record. When the issue is salvation, however, and insofar as salvation is thought of as something that occurs in an afterlife, there is no such possibility. Exclusivism about salvation involves moving the relevant matter concerning which claims to be special are being made beyond the possibility of this-worldly confirmation or disconfirmation, by removing it from this earthly life, while making the relevant expectation that is associated with our being special as grand as it can be.

Needless to say, I do not argue that there is no religious tradition that is correct in its claim that its members alone are special in this regard. For one thing, I believe myself to lack the requisite expertise to make such a declaration. Rather, my contention is that the belief that one's own group is special in this regard is a worry and is suspect. One has to ask whether each group is the best judge in its own case. One also has to ask whether such an interpretation of the situation of one's own group might not be somewhat self-serving. And the question arises whether such an assertion in the case of one's own religious group is not also somewhat unbecoming.

It might be objected that inclusivism or pluralism might just as readily be objects of suspicion—perhaps on the grounds that these positions may sometimes seem to have been endorsed for the sake of convenience or with a view to conforming to the spirit of the times. Yet the question seems especially salient in the case in which, so to speak, we alone win and everyone else loses. Likewise, one could ask whether someone who endorses ES1 but rejects ES2, and hence is an exclusivist about the means but not an exclusivist tout court, should also

worry about thinking herself special in a particular respect—namely, in just the respect that ES1 specifies. One simple thought here, however, is just that if thinking yourself to be somewhat special (in the fashion just suggested) is in any way problematic, thinking yourself to be *really* special (in the way of doing so that is involved in being an exclusivist about salvation, with the endorsement of both ES1 and ES2 that this consists in) is all the more so.

I do not suggest that people adopt exclusivism about salvation—or, for that matter, exclusivism in any broader sense or, indeed, their religious views in general—because it is to their advantage to do so. For one thing, an exclusivist about salvation may have given up a great deal to belong to her religion, so that overall a calculation of self-interest—at least, not a good one—is unlikely to explain her religious stance. Thus such a person may belong to a religion that is very demanding of its practitioners in a variety of ways, requiring great self-sacrifice. The exclusivistic beliefs in question may be part of a large system of beliefs whose adoption does not appear to issue, as a whole, from a calculation of what is to one's advantage, or at least not from a good calculation. And the typical believer may, as far as we can tell, have adopted the relevant exclusivistic beliefs for the respectable, everyday, familiar reason that this is what she has been told to believe by those she trusts and has been brought up to trust. Furthermore, the exclusivistic views in question may even have been endorsed with regret and with reluctance and only after careful reflection and in the wake of having found those views inescapable in light of scriptures or the teachings of the tradition, or the like. And those who consider themselves favored in the relevant respect may think that they are the immensely fortunate beneficiaries of divine grace, may feel that they do not merit their good fortune, and may feel humbled by it. All of this may be so.

Yet in spite of all this, the belief under discussion may still deserve to be viewed with suspicion, both by those who hold it and by outsiders looking in. Life can be complicated in a host of ways, including this one. A demanding aspect to membership can itself serve to obscure and conceal a self-serving aspect. One way it can do so is make it seem that an anticipated reward would be deserved. Another is that the very demanding path that is involved may be taken to bespeak one's having a privileged status, one's being special, a status that, in turn, is given expression in exclusivistic beliefs. And as humble as they may be about it, exclusivists are still claiming an extremely privileged status for themselves and for their coreligionists. Again, I do not say that there is no group that is special in this respect. My point is only that the view that one belongs to such a group should be viewed with suspicion and embraced with caution and a second thought or two (or more). Probably, the worrying nature of all this is hard to see from the inside. After all, traditions have explanations that make a lot of sense from the inside. But the corresponding claims of members of other traditions will be more readily agreed to be appropriate objects of suspicion.

By way of casting into clearer relief what is problematic about the particular way of thinking that one's own group is special that exclusivism involves, here is another possible way one might think that one's group is special. Imagine that there is a religious group whose path is a demanding one, which those who take it recognize it to be demanding. Imagine, too, that those who take this path understand there to be great benefits that are derivative from this demanding path but that the benefits of this process are understood to be bestowed (via some mechanism or other—perhaps a modified law of Karma, for example) on nonmembers. And the members of the generous tradition cheerfully endorse this self-sacrificial arrangement. Rewards for themselves are reluctantly accepted, if at all, but they are mainly concerned to benefit others, especially their brothers and sisters whose views they do not share. All one needs to do is to juxtapose the two proposed ways of seeing one's group as special. The point makes itself.

Or consider this. Imagine that we come across two remote peoples. Each has its religious traditions, its sacred texts, its revered leaders, its established practices, and so on. One says, though, that only its members will receive salvation. They face this fact with reluctance. It is sad and unfortunate, they say, but there it is, and it is not up to them; all they can do is decide how to react in light of this fact. The other group holds that others can achieve salvation through its route—and this includes others with quite different views. All other things being equal, there is an extra question to be asked in the first case. Of course, if we encountered a hundred groups of the first sort, it may be that one of them would be getting things right and be accurate in thinking itself special in the relevant way. But that does not obviate the need to look with some suspicion at all such cases, whether one is an outsider looking in or an insider contemplating his own situation.

While I have identified what I take to be grounds for suspicion and an important area of concern, I am less sure when someone might reasonably judge that these grounds for suspicion have been laid to rest and the concern has been allayed. Actually, my inclination is to think of what is under discussion here as an abiding structural reason for wariness, one that can, however, be given adequate expression by accompanying the relevant beliefs with an element of suspicion, even while one holds them. This applies, in particular, to the belief that one's group is special in the relevant respect.

Second, there is, as William Rowe notes, "the practical difficulty that hundreds of thousands of people live and die in other religions and cultures without ever having heard of the path of salvation taught by a particular exclusivistic religion" (*Philosophy of Religion*, 164). Rowe's point, which, like the last point, concerns exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation in particular, is that it would be profoundly unfair for the contingent matter of when and where one lives to have such a significance. In making this last point, he is apparently

assuming that something like the belief requirement is operative. Indeed, since he appears to assume that the fact that someone has lived and died "without having heard of the path of salvation taught by a particular exclusivistic religion" would—according to an exclusivistic religion—have the result that one would not achieve salvation, he may be endorsing a version of the belief requirement that is along the lines of ES4. Rowe does not say this, but perhaps he would also agree that any attempt to argue that these are *not* contingent matters but rather that the fact that some are well situated and others are poorly situated in this regard is a result of the operation of the will of God, the law of Karma, or some other such mechanism faces the obvious difficulty that the force, being, or mechanism responsible for such a fiasco would be morally unimpressive—a result that is inconsistent with central claims of the relevant religious traditions.[12] It would be unjust for people who follow faithfully and in good conscience the path that has been presented to them as the correct path—and, indeed, often has been presented as such by the people they trust most and have most reason to trust—to be excluded from salvation just because it turned out not to be the correct path. Looking at the matter from a monotheistic perspective, we can say that since this would be unjust, we can reasonably reject the idea that a deity would permit it. Any tradition that involves a deity who is just and benevolent, as a worship-worthy being would be, would not permit such a state of affairs.

Third, and this point is also made by Rowe, in religious traditions other than one's own, "one finds saintly figures . . . individuals whose lives exhibit profound ethical commitment and religious devotion" (*Philosophy of Religion*, 165). The thought that such people are excluded from salvation by virtue of belonging to the wrong religion is dubious. In saying this, I am assuming that salvation is bestowed in accordance with desert and is not a consequence of happenstance.

Fourth—and here I move from considering objections to identifying a relevant area of inquiry—as mentioned, exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation is sometimes accompanied by, and sometimes in addition is underpinned by, the belief requirement. However, it is not clear that we have much control

12. Another question raised by Rowe's remarks is how we are to understand the notion of hearing about a certain path to salvation or, more broadly, hearing about the teachings of a religious tradition. There is the question of whether one's auditory capacities are working properly, the separate question of whether one has the cognitive capacity to understand what one has heard, and the separate question of whether one has actually understood what one has heard. These are all ways in which the notion of hearing might be interpreted. Further, there is the question whether the relevant beliefs are live options for someone who is encountering them. Obviously, there are plenty of worms in this can. For a start, someone who has "heard" certain teachings in all three senses identified but who finds what he has heard and understood to be ridiculous and implausible, so that it is not a live option for him, may be no more at fault for not believing what he has heard than someone who has not heard the teachings in question in any of these senses.

over our relevant beliefs.[13] If belief were not at all under our control, and if, in addition, our salvation were to depend on what we believe, then our salvation would, in turn—at least to the extent that it depended on what we believe—not be under our control either. The questions here include the following. What sort of control or influence over whether they achieve salvation is it reasonable to consider people to be able to exercise? And would the extent to which people are able to exercise control or influence over their beliefs suffice for this level of control? I will not pursue these matters here.

Fifth—and once again, this is less an objection and more an area of inquiry—here is a point that is relevant since it has a bearing on attempts to compare exclusivism about salvation with competing views. There are a number of considerations that lead people to endorse exclusivism about salvation. These include the following: the view that our group has greater insight into important matters of religious significance than does anyone else, the view that our group alone correctly understands precisely what is required for salvation, and the view that our group has something valuable and even priceless to which others should have access, and that is very worthy of protection and of transmission to others. Many religious people have strong feelings about such matters as these. However, many of these considerations, and the attendant feelings, may be given expression through what I will shortly introduce as inclusivism about salvation—or by some versions thereof, for there are many versions. The availability of these versions of inclusivism constitutes a difficulty for exclusivism insofar as they provide a way to give expression to much that fuels exclusivism but that is free of its most serious difficulties.

I do not say that the objections and concerns mentioned provide a decisive refutation of exclusivism about salvation. But we can see, at any rate, some of the objections and concerns that confront exclusivism about salvation.

Additional Interpretations of Exclusivism

The term *exclusivism* is sometimes used in a general way to refer to the combination of exclusivism about truth and exclusivism about salvation, where these are construed in one or another of the ways we have probed. Here, from a contemporary textbook in philosophy of religion, is an example of such a combination, all of the components of which we actually have already encountered, though never combined in this particular way:

13. I reflect on this in chapter 3 of *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*. A full discussion of this topic would require asking whether there are relevant alternatives to belief, such as acceptance, that might be thought both to be sufficient for salvation and to be under our control. I will not broach this interesting topic here.

> [According to exclusivism] salvation, liberation, human fulfillment, or whatever else one considers as the ultimate goal of the religion, is found solely in or through one particular religion. Although other religions contain truths, one religion is exclusively effective by alone providing the way of salvation or liberation. Adherents of other religions, although sincere in their piety and upright in their moral conduct, cannot attain salvation through their religions. To be saved, they must be told about and acknowledge the unique way. . . . [Exclusivists contend that religions] make incompatible truth claims. But incompatible truth claims cannot both be true. Hence, where they contradict, at least one claim must be false. This might be termed doctrinal exclusivism: the doctrines of one religion are mostly true while contradictory claims in other traditions are mostly false. (Michael Peterson et al., *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 270)

It seems that an exclusivist is understood here to be someone who endorses exclusivism about salvation, which is the combination of ES1 and ES2. And ES4, a more specific form of the belief requirement, seems to be expressed by the remark that in order to be saved, people "must be told about and acknowledge the unique way." On the issue of truth, what is being proposed may amount to ET 9, though it may also be that, following the logic of chapter 2, what is proposed is best reconstructed as ET11 or perhaps ET12.

Here is another rendering. Exclusivism assumes the "uniqueness, superiority and finality" of one's own tradition, according to James C. Livingston and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (*Modern Christian Thought, Vol. 2: The Twentieth Century*, 471). Each of these terms (*uniqueness*, *superiority*, *finality*) in turn requires explanation. One might, for example, propose such an explanation in terms of precisely the same combination that, I just suggested, may be present in the work of Peterson and colleagues. But there are other options.

Alan Race defines *exclusivism* in yet another way. He suggests that Christian exclusivism, which is the topic he especially wishes to pursue, is the view that "counts the revelation in Jesus Christ as the sole criterion by which all religions . . . can be understood and judged" (*Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 31). Obviously, a corresponding analysis can be provided by other religious traditions. This analysis is, however, also open to a number of interpretations. A lot depends on the respects in which other religions are being judged. As salvifically effective? As true? As inspiring? And so on. I suspect that Race means that to the extent that other traditions disagree with Christianity, they are wrong—which is to comment on the issue of truth and, incidentally, is compatible with the other traditions being right about a great deal. Also, if "the revelation in Jesus Christ [is] the sole criterion by which all religions . . . can be understood and judged," there is at least the possibility that

some of them will be judged quite favorably or even very favorably in some respects—for example, with respect to truth or with respect to salvation or in any one of numerous other ways. At any rate, this account of exclusivism does not explicitly state that all religions will be found wanting in all of the relevant respects.

As you would expect, there are uses of *exclusivism* whose focus is on something other than truth or salvation. E. P. Sanders writes of how Saint Paul's "exclusivism" made it difficult for many in Paul's early audiences to accept his message (*Paul* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 21). Sanders here alludes to Paul's insistence that Christian converts eschew participation in paganism. So exclusive participation in one religion is what is at issue here. Exclusivism, so construed, would be the view that this is required, desirable, preferable, or the like. Or it might be the view that those who participate in pagan practices should be shunned or excluded from the community.

The point is familiar and merits repetition. Exclusivism excludes. And there are many things from which someone may be excluded and hence many ways in which "being excluded" can be interpreted. It goes without saying that there is no single correct way to use the term *exclusivism*. But it is helpful to distinguish clearly the various options. What I am proposing, in this as in some other cases, is what seems to me to be the best way to slice the cake, but there are others. And which way we do so is not, in the end, the most important issue.

Finally, here is another point on the connection between truth and salvation. If, as I have suggested, exclusivism about salvation includes ES1, the view that only one's own tradition delivers salvation, it might be thought natural to characterize exclusivism about truth as the view that only one's own tradition makes true claims, which is just to say that here we have a reason to take exclusivism about truth to be just ET1, the very narrow view with which we began discussion of that topic. Needless to say, however, this appeal to symmetry should not be thought to be anything more than one of many relevant factors that need to be considered. I believe that it is, on balance, outweighed by the various reasons to adopt the more expansive reading of exclusivism about truth that was developed in chapter 2, according to which exclusivism about truth should be read to include what I have characterized as its more open forms. However, the appeal to symmetry might lead us to move in the opposite direction: to extend the more open analysis developed in the area of truth to the area of salvation. And the fact that—as I aver—exclusivism about salvation, as I have characterized it, is a problematic position might also move us in this direction.[14] We certainly could

14. On the other hand, the following consideration tugs a little in the opposite direction. The fact that ET1, given the fact of shared content among the traditions, leads to inconsistency was an important reason to move in the direction of a more open notion of exclusivism about truth. But this particular factor is absent in the case of exclusivism about salvation.

come up with an open version of exclusivism about salvation if we set out to do so. This might be that we are far better off than others with respect to salvation—either with respect to the means, the beneficiaries, or both—but that others still do fairly well in such respects: their situation is not disastrous. In fact, I will revisit this issue at the very end of chapter 5.

5

Inclusivism about Salvation

Introduction

I will distinguish a number of versions of inclusivism about salvation. They share in common the following two claims. First, all versions say:

IS1 Salvation is available to outsiders.

So all versions of inclusivism about salvation reject exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation. Second, all versions say that, in one respect or another:

IS2 Outsiders are not as well situated with respect to salvation as we are.

So all versions espouse the key inclusivistic idea that while others do fairly well—in this case, with respect to salvation—we do better than everyone else. Each of the versions of inclusivism about salvation that I will consider provides its own analysis of why these two claims are true.

The Piggyback Analysis

The first rendering of inclusivism about salvation that I will consider makes this interesting claim:

IS3 Outsiders can achieve salvation but only via our tradition.

IS3, as stated, does not say explicitly that ours is the only tradition through which salvation can be achieved, although this is the natural way to read it, and it is the way in which I intend it to be taken. (Strictly speaking, IS3 is consistent with its being the case that we can achieve salvation through, or even only through, one or more other traditions. Mind you, it is hard to see what might motivate such a curious combination of views.) For the sake of clarity, let's make this explicit as follows:

IS4 Outsiders can achieve salvation but only via our tradition, which is the only means to salvation.

So according to this view, our vehicle is the only one that can get you to the desired destination. Yet others can piggyback along on it. So let's call IS4 the *piggyback* view.

The piggyback view has something important in common with *exclusivism* about salvation. Both endorse exclusivism about the means of salvation:

ES1 Our tradition alone delivers salvation.

But piggyback inclusivism about salvation and exclusivism about salvation obviously disagree about who can benefit from this salvation and, in particular, about whether membership in one's tradition is necessary for achieving salvation. The claim that one's own tradition alone delivers salvation—a claim that is common to both—leaves this matter unresolved.

The piggyback approach, as just noted, has it that our tradition uniquely provides the process or mechanism through which salvation is achieved. Access to this mechanism and to its benefits is uniquely made available by states of affairs or processes that belong, in some sense or other, to our tradition. Anyone who thinks that salvation is achieved in some other way is mistaken. And yet—in spite of these facts—outsiders may achieve salvation. An example of the piggyback form of inclusivism about salvation is provided by Pure Land Buddhism, according to which everyone is eventually delivered into the Pure Land through the compassion of Amida Buddha.

The piggyback view will normally be accompanied by a specification of conditions that members of other traditions must satisfy if they are to get on board, as well as conditions that would exclude someone from coming on board. A standard move in this context among the theistic traditions is to argue that openness to general revelation is one relevant factor.[1] Or the relevant consideration

1. For example, John Wesley allowed that some who have never been exposed to the gospel and hence have not had a chance to respond to it could be saved. A condition that they must meet, however, is that they have acquired the basic knowledge of God that, Wesley believed, is universally available, at least in an inchoate form. If they have responded aright to whatever light they have received, they can be saved. Wesley endorsed these ideas late in his life, having been persuaded that this is what should be expected from a loving and just God. This relatively positive assessment of the situation of others apparently came to take priority over another aspect of Wesley's thought—namely, that Christians have no scriptural authority to make definitive claims about the salvific status of others. (I return to this idea of eschewing comment on others in chapter 8.) For an introduction to the relevant aspects of Wesley's thought, see Randy L. Maddox, "Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation through Other Religions," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 27(12): 7–29, 1992. For discussion of some similar views, see Harold A. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 320–323. I comment on some of Netland's views in chapter 8.

may be a moral one—such as perhaps adhering to a moral law that is taken to be available to all. Thus the authors of a recent study concerning the Catholic tradition write that "the modern Church shows an increasingly positive attitude toward the salvation of non-Christians, holding that those who are ignorant of the teachings of the Church, through no fault of their own, may follow the precepts of the natural law written on their conscience. And these may, through God's grace, receive eternal life" (James C. Livingston and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought, Vol. 2: The Twentieth Century*, 475). These New Testament passages may also express the same idea:

> Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. (Matthew 7: 21)

> But glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile. . . . (Romans 2: 10)

The context suggests that what is meant in the first of these passages by doing "the will of [the] Father" is not just a matter of belief, if it even involves belief at all, and that it is more a matter of how one lives one's life in general, with much emphasis on the moral character of one's behavior. Both passages seem to concern a moral standard of some sort that can be met by outsiders and that is understood to be a sufficient condition of salvation.

Another possibility is that the relevant condition that members of other traditions must satisfy is a matter of exhibiting certain virtues or certain attitudes—perhaps honesty, sincerity, submission, or earnestness. Or being "sensitive to God's call in [one's] inner self" or displaying a "radical acceptance of one's being" (Livingston and Schüssler Fiorenza, 475, 477). Or being a member of some other tradition whose members are seen as especially favored in some way.

Another standard move—and this time we are dealing with a condition that would allegedly exclude someone from coming on board—is to argue that anyone who has explicitly rejected the favored message is excluded. Thus some Christians grant that there are non-Christians who can achieve salvation (through Jesus) without knowing or believing anything about Jesus, while also contending that anyone who has explicitly rejected Christianity and its message is excluded from so benefiting.[2]

2. Irenaeus advocated just such a view. See, for example, Terry Tiessen, "Irenaeus and Modern Responses to the Challenge of Modern Religious Pluralism," *ATA Journal* 4(2): 30–51, 1996. See also Tiessen's book *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1993).

There is room for numerous interesting nuances here. For example, the condition that would exclude outsiders from salvation might not be precisely that one has explicitly rejected the favored tradition but rather that one has done so while knowing that that tradition is, say, the tradition that contains the most truths or the tradition that is the sole means to salvation. A condition such as this, unlike the one from which I have just distinguished it, would probably be satisfied by very few people. A variation on this theme is proposed in the following case. According to the Second Vatican Council, "[whosoever], therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved" (*Lumen Gentium*, section 14).[3] The excluding condition here may be an unwillingness to take part in a tradition even while you know it to be the tradition in which you ought to take part. You recognize the correct path, but you refuse to take it.

Ibn al-'Arabī, appealing to the mercy of God, provides an analysis of the Qur'anic statement "We never chastise, until We send forth a Messenger" (17: 15) that also nicely exemplifies these themes:

> Note that [God] did not say, "until We send forth a person." Hence the *message* of the one who is sent must be established for the one to whom it is directed. There must be clear and manifest proofs established for each person to whom the messenger is sent, for many a sign [*āyah*] has within it obscurity or equivocality such that some people do not perceive what it proves. The clarity of the proof must be such that it establishes the person's [messengership] for each person to whom he is sent. Only then, if the person refuses it, will he be taken to account. Hence, this verse has within it a tremendous mercy, because of the diversity of human dispositions that lead to a diversity of views. He who knows the all-inclusiveness of the divine mercy, which God reports, [*encompasses*] *all things* [Q. 7: 156], knows that God did this only because of mercy toward His servants.[4]

So, according to Ibn al-'Arabī, what is problematic is rejection of the message by someone for whom the authenticity of that message has been established. It is not enough for a person to be confronted with a proof in some impersonal, take-it-or-leave-it way. It seems that the recipient of the message must actually be persuaded, even if this takes a certain amount of tailoring of the message so that

3. See www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

4. Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūhāt al-makkiyyah* (Beirut: Dār Sādir, 1968), 3:469. Quoted by Mohammad Khalil in chapter2, "Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī: All Paths Lead to God," *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press).

it will be found credible by each individual. And what makes one ineligible for salvation is refusing a message whose authenticity has actually been established for one in this fashion. Perhaps it even involves saying *no* to something to which one has already said *yes*, in which case the mental gymnastics involved seem complicated. In that case, non-Muslims who are not persuaded in the first place are not to be understood to be refusing to surrender to God and hence are not excluded from salvation on that account. An alternative reading is that what is being said here by Ibn al-'Arabī is that what makes one ineligible for salvation is stubbornly refusing to say *yes* when one has abundant reason, and maybe even personalized reasons, to do so. In that case, it is non-Muslims who have been provided with "clear and manifest proofs," proofs that make it unreasonable not to believe but who nevertheless do not believe, who are excluded from salvation.

C. S. Lewis pursues some of the same themes. "Honest rejection of Christ, however mistaken, will be forgiven and healed—'Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him.' But to evade the Son of man, to look the other way, to pretend you haven't noticed . . . this is a different matter" (*God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994], 111). Lewis appears to be saying that the condition that would make an outsider ineligible for salvation would not be rejection per se but rather something along the lines of an unwillingness to face up to what you know to be true—a refusal to admit what you are actually already aware of. This may involve the sort of mental gymnastics referred to in the last paragraph. Nonbelief per se, in short, is not what is problematic: it is nonbelief that has the additional feature mentioned that is said to be problematic.

Perhaps the evangelical Christian thinker Clark H. Pinnock has in mind something similar. He says that "[pre-Christian] faith is valid up until that moment when Christ is preached, but not afterwords. *When Christ is known*, the obligation comes into force to believe on him. The unevangelized are expected to receive the Good News *when it reaches them*. God's offer becomes an objective obligation at that time, and refusal to accept that offer would be fatal. No hope can be offered to those declining God's offer to them in Christ" (*A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 168, my emphasis). Obviously, there is a big difference between, on the one hand, being at the receiving end of Christian preaching about Christ and, on the other hand, Christ being "known" to one. After all, someone may hear such preaching and not understand it. Or she may understand it but believe it to be mistaken, questionable, or deserving, at most, of merely tentative endorsement—all conditions that fall short of the knowledge that is mentioned in the second sentence quoted here. So Pinnock's point may be that once the Christian message has been preached to people and they know this message to be true, they are obliged to believe it. Prior to this combination of conditions being met, however, another faith may be "valid" for those who endorse it.

Yet another variation is that those who have not encountered the relevant truths but who *would* have believed them if they had encountered them can be saved or even are saved. Clearly, there are many variations on these themes, and there is room for many subtly and interestingly different renderings of the conditions that an outsider must meet.

Another area in which such variation can occur is with respect to how much, and what exactly, the beneficiaries of a salvific process are understood to grasp about their situation. Are outsiders who benefit from an effective means to salvation understood to grasp (either while they are benefiting or eventually) how it has come about that they have benefited? There are various possibilities here, too, and I do not mean to assume anything in particular in this regard. So the idea that when you achieve salvation you will eventually adopt our point of view or become one of us in some explicit way is to be understood as a possible though not inevitable feature of the piggyback view.

The very motif of piggybacking is, I suppose, suggestive of a process that one is likely to be aware of once one is undergoing it. But as has in effect just been mentioned, we can imagine that one could benefit from a salvific process after the fashion of the piggyback proposal without being aware while it is occurring that this is so. Consider the following tale. The wayfarers go from place to place. As they do so, they pass many tollbooths. But the tollbooths are concealed, and the wayfarers are unaware of them and of passing them. And the fees of the wayfarers are always paid by someone who wishes to remain incognito. So they are deriving an important benefit through a process of which they are unaware. In fact, the wayfarers are multiply oblivious: they are unaware that they have a relevant need, unaware that it is being satisfied on their behalf, and unaware of the process through which this is occurring. This is the tale of the hidden tollbooths.[5]

And here is the tale of the rescued passengers. A ship is sinking in heavy seas fairly near to shore. Many of the passengers are in the water and frantically struggling to stay afloat. Some lifeboats are launched before the ship goes down, but in the rough seas the ship's lifeboats flounder, too. However, unbeknownst to the desperate and struggling passengers, our ship is also in the area. We, too, have let down our lifeboats, and our lifeboats manage to pick up some of the floundering passengers who would otherwise surely have drowned. Our lifeboats, once they pick up the passengers, race to the shore, drop them there, and race back to try to help others. This is no time for offering explanations, making distinctions, or asking questions, and in the general panic and confusion, many passengers who are saved mistakenly think that lifeboats from their own boat have come to their assistance. In this case, there is a need that is all too apparent to the beneficiaries of the process. This need is provided for, and they know that

5. Comments from Kevin Healey have helped me to think about this case.

this is so, but it is provided for through a process they do not understand. It is provided for by our process and not, contrary to what they believe, by theirs.

Anonymous Membership

My starting point, and inspiration, for the next approach is the work of the most famous exponent of the anonymous membership theme and indeed of the usage of the notion of anonymity and of the very term *anonymous* in this context. This is the German Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984). According to Rahner, God intends the salvation of all people and there must therefore be, at all times and in all places, the possibility of salvation for all. So salvation can, in his view, be achieved by non-Christians. However, in Rahner's view, this is so only in virtue of certain truths that are unique to Christianity. In particular, it is because the Christian account of how salvation occurs is correct. But the benefits of this salvific process are available to non-Christians. Rahner says that it is proper to refer to non-Christians who are the beneficiaries of divine grace and who thereby achieve salvation as "anonymous Christians." They are Christians without knowing that this is so. So Rahner combines the piggyback view with the idea that various outsiders actually are insiders without realizing that this is so. In an important respect, therefore, the insiders understand the outsiders better than the outsiders understand themselves.

C. S. Lewis also endorses a variation on the anonymous membership theme:

> There are people who do not accept the full Christian doctrine about Christ but who are so strongly attracted by Him that they are His in a much deeper sense than they themselves understand. There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it. (*Mere Christianity*, 208–209)

So, according to Lewis, some outsiders belong to Christianity without realizing that they do so. Two conditions that signify that this is so are (1) being attracted to Christ in a certain way, even while not understanding that this is so, and (2) being led to concentrate on the parts of their own religion that agree with Christianity.[6]

6. Another interesting passage from Lewis is this: "A Buddhist of good will may be led to concentrate more and more on the Buddhist teaching about mercy and to leave in the background (though he might still say he believed) the Buddhist teaching on certain other points. Many of the good Pagans long before Christ's birth may have been in this position" (209).

Rather than enter into a discussion of what exactly Rahner, Lewis, or anyone else has in mind, however, I want to identify a pair of alternatives in this area:

IS5 Some outsiders belong to our group without knowing that they do so, and they can achieve salvation because they so belong.

IS6 Some outsiders belong to our group without knowing that they do so, where this involves their achieving salvation because they so belong.

IS5 and IS6 agree on some things. They agree that there is an important respect in which we understand others, or at least some others, better than they understand themselves. And what we understand about them, in particular, has among its components that unbeknownst to themselves, they belong to our group. They are anonymous members of our group—members whose membership is so well concealed that they themselves are unaware of it.

However, IS6 brings to the fore an issue that has not been touched on so far, and one with respect to which it differs from IS5. Inclusivism about salvation, in all of its forms, involves a rejection of exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation, which is the view that outsiders cannot achieve salvation. Naturally, therefore, inclusivism about salvation says that outsiders can achieve salvation. But there is also a variant that says that not only can they do so but also that they actually do so. (Needless to say, such an idea in no way commits us to being able to identify who the outsiders in this second category might be.) This is certainly a way in which outsiders would be included. So it is no surprise that in the case of all of the versions of inclusivism I am discussing, we can formulate a variation that says that outsiders not only can achieve salvation but also actually achieve it. Thus there is a variant of the piggyback view that says that outsiders not only may achieve salvation via our route but also actually do so. So this thread runs through the discussion of this chapter. I make it explicit here because of the particular history of the idea of anonymous membership. Another aspect of IS6 is that it, in effect, presupposes a notion of membership that involves the achievement of salvation.

As with the piggyback view, an actual statement of the anonymous membership position will normally involve an account of the conditions that outsiders must meet if they are to be anonymous members. And the various candidates for such conditions that were discussed while probing the piggyback view might also be invoked here. The anonymous membership idea also clearly entails that we are in a privileged position relative to others in that it is to *our* tradition that the relevant others anonymously belong. It is in virtue of so belonging that they can, or do, achieve salvation. We are also privileged in that we correctly understand the salvific mechanism from which the anonymous members of our group can, or do, benefit.

Actually, the question arises whether the notion of anonymous membership just boils down to the piggyback view, albeit the piggyback view dressed up for a special occasion. One consideration that speaks in favor of treating the anonymous membership proposals as a distinct theme is that these proposals (as presented in IS5 and IS6) may actually be thought of as special cases of *exclusivism* about salvation—versions with a very inclusive notion of who counts as a member of one's tradition.[7] After all, what is said is that being a member of one's tradition (even in the case of those who are members without knowing that they are) is essential either for being eligible for salvation or for actually achieving salvation. No such element was present in the piggyback view.

A related thought is this. Our general topic is what is to be said about the salvation of outsiders. If certain putative outsiders actually are insiders, when we discuss their salvation, we are not discussing the salvation of outsiders at all. We are supposed to be talking about outsiders, but here we are, talking about insiders. We have, it may seem, changed the subject! However, it is helpful at this point to draw attention to the obvious distinction between actual membership and anonymous membership. Members in IS1 (and IS2, IS3, and IS4) are actual members. Exactly what actual membership requires will vary somewhat, and my approach has been to say that what it requires in the case of any tradition is just what that tradition says it requires. Anonymous members, by contrast, are not actual members: they are actual nonmembers who in a particular attenuated and figurative way are classified as members to draw attention to some aspect of their situation along the lines of what is spelled out in IS5 and IS6. People who do not actually belong, who do not understand themselves to belong, and who would deny that they belong if they were asked may be members in the anonymous sense. In fact, only people who do not actually belong and do not understand themselves to belong are eligible for the anonymous sort of membership. So we have not changed the subject after all.

What we can say for sure is that the notion of anonymous membership raises some unique questions. And in the final analysis, nothing much hangs on whether we classify this motif, as specified in IS5 and IS6, as a special case of the piggyback approach.

The Best Route Analysis

The foregoing inclusivistic proposals have it that there is a single route to salvation, although actual membership in the tradition with which this route is uniquely associated is not necessary for salvation. Next I turn to inclusivistic

7. However, as we saw in chapter 4, the notion of membership involved will need to remain fairly exclusive if we are to have something that counts as exclusivism. Once again, the key point is that exclusivism must exclude. So even if some outsiders are included, many must be excluded, if what we have is to count as exclusivism.

proposals according to which there are multiple routes. In this section and the next, I will look at two of these proposals. First, there is this claim:

> IS7 Other traditions deliver salvation but do not do so as well as our tradition.

So while other traditions will get you to the desired destination, our tradition is best equipped in terms of getting one to the desired destination. It provides the best route. However, *best route* may be understood in a number of different ways.

Best in "best route" might mean "most effective" or "best equipped to get you to the destination." This might be conceived of along the following lines. If, of an afternoon, you happen to be going from Collooney to Sligo, you might travel by the new N4 motorway. Or you might take the old road through Ballisodare, with its sharp bends under the railway bridge near Carricknagat. Or you could take a circuitous route by Ballygawley. Or in another direction entirely, you might go across the Ox Mountains by Cooney. Each of these routes, and indeed umpteen others, will take you from Collooney to Sligo. But one route, namely, the N4, is best equipped to get you to Sligo in the sense of being most direct and least circuitous.

The most direct and least circuitous route to salvation might be thought to be the route that has, for example, fewer obstacles to surmount or circumvent, fewer hurdles to cross, and fewer difficulties to deal with. And these ideas might in turn be cashed in in a variety of ways. Perhaps it will be in terms of the relative easiness of the spiritual discipline that is required for salvation, the modest extent of the transformation of character that is a prerequisite for salvation, or the small number of incarnations through which one must go if one is to achieve salvation. However, there are traditions to which it would not come naturally to think that the ease with which the relevant path may be taken is the most salient issue. On the contrary, a religion may say that the arduousness of its spiritual discipline, the extent of the spiritual transformation it requires, the demanding nature of the ethical code it imposes, or any other such demanding element is actually a point in its favor—in the very specific sense that the relevant exertions actually make salvation more likely. From such a point of view, which does not seem unrealistic given what some, if not most, religions actually require of their followers, the most effective route probably would not be understood to be the one that involves the fewest difficulties. On the contrary, an easy and less difficult route would be an inferior route.[8]

The best approach to take here, I think, is just to say that whatever considerations are understood to make a route to salvation most effective, an inclusivist

8. Thanks to Cody Harris for some helpful observations on this point.

of the best route sort will think that her tradition does best with respect to those considerations. She will say:

> IS8 Our route is best in terms of whatever makes for effectiveness in a route to salvation.

And this may play itself out in thinking that our tradition is best because what it requires is easier in some respect than what is required by other traditions. But it may just as easily play itself out in thinking that our tradition is best in a way that involves its being more difficult in some respect. Then again, level of ease or difficulty may not be the salient issue or may not enter the picture at all. It all depends on what the inclusivist's tradition says about what makes a route to salvation most effective. There is room for a lot of variation in this area.

However, a route to salvation might be thought best for the rather different reason that its success rate is thought to be better than that of other routes. Perhaps 90% of those who take our route are thought to achieve salvation, whereas in the case of the best among the competition, only 50% will do so. Or we score 50%, and the best the competition does is 20%. Needless to say, any actual attempt to attach numbers to the proposed success rates of different traditions is likely to be fanciful in the extreme, but the general point is untouched by this detail.

It would make sense to combine the idea of effectiveness and the idea of success since it would be natural to expect that having the most effective route would lead to an increased rate of success in reaching the destination for those who take it. Yet these are distinct ideas. One has to do with the capacity of a tradition to deliver salvation; the other has to do with its success in doing so. Someone could consistently believe both that a certain tradition, such as one's own tradition, provides the most effective route *and* that some other tradition actually has a superior track record. That might seem to be a somewhat surprising combination of views, but one can imagine scenarios in which it would make sense. Cases in which one is much less impressed in relevant respects with one's coreligionists than one is with the members of another tradition provide one such scenario.

Actually, there is a broader issue here. We can think in general terms of *considerations that are understood to make for goodness in a route to salvation*. Presumably, any account of what makes for goodness in this area will include prominently among its elements those I have just mentioned, namely, the effectiveness of the tradition in enabling members of the tradition to achieve salvation and its success in doing so. (And a perspective that is reasonably classified as inclusivist will, among other things, contend that one's own tradition does best in such respects.) But an inclusivist of the best route sort may think that there are additional factors that make for goodness in a route to

salvation.[9] Having an especially arduous spiritual discipline, an especially demanding moral code, or moral teachings that have the flexibility to adapt to new challenges, for example, as part of one's route to salvation might be mentioned in this context. That is to say, the fact that it requires engaging in an arduous spiritual discipline or an especially demanding moral code (etc.) may be seen as something that is itself good about a certain route to salvation, irrespective of whether it is thought to make that route to salvation more effective. And there are many other possibilities. Being able to have a foretaste of salvation here and now, for example, is another candidate. The same goes for achieving, or having the possibility of achieving, moral perfection in this life.

The best approach, I think, is just to say that whatever considerations are understood to make for goodness in a route to salvation, an inclusivist of the best route sort will think that her tradition does best with respect to those considerations. She will say:

> IS9 Our route is best in terms of whatever makes for goodness in a route to salvation.

Again, what this amounts to will depend on what the inclusivist's tradition says about what makes a route to salvation better or worse. So we have a number of versions of the best route theme, as many at least as there are theories about what makes such a route better or worse.

Probably, too, a claim that our route is the best among a number of alternatives should be considered to express inclusivism only if our estimate of our route is fairly positive in the relevant respect. For example, in the case of the reading that focuses on the rate of success, if you think that we score, say, 2% and the closest among the opposition scores 1%, probably this is not to be classified as inclusivism—even though we score better than anyone else, indeed, *twice* as well as the best of the rest. We might classify it as *depressing*. In addition, the best route must be taken to be considerably better than the less good routes: if the difference is slight, what we have would come closer to pluralism, at least in one respect.

The idea of the best route has various additional aspects. For example, certain traditions may be suited to certain types of individuals—where this might be a matter of psychological type, personal proclivities, interests, or something else—so that what is more effective for one type of person is less effective for another. And the question arises whether being most effective overall would

9. We do not evaluate routes from Collooney to Sligo solely in terms of their effectiveness in getting you to Sligo. Just for a start, there is the energy efficiency of the different modes of transportation that are available on each route to consider. There is the scenery to consider: in this respect, the route by Cooney wins, in my view. Or one might have a sentimental attachment to a particular route. And so on.

then be a matter of most effective across a range of such types. Or its effectiveness in the case of the particular community that adheres to the relevant tradition might be the issue. In any case, there are various details here that one might ponder.

Finally, in presenting the best route analysis, I am assuming a single salvific destination to which there is more than one route. Later, I will touch on the alternative possibility that there is more than one salvific destination.

Derivative Powers

Next, I turn to a position that, interestingly, shares much in common both with the piggyback form of inclusivism about salvation and with the best route approach. The central idea is:

> IS10 Other traditions can deliver salvation, but they derive their capacity to do so from our tradition.

There are, therefore, benefits to others that originate with our tradition but that are mediated by another tradition that has acquired from ours a capacity to deliver salvation. This proposal shares with the piggyback proposal the idea that there are benefits that originate in our tradition and accrue to outsiders. But according to this new proposal, those benefits do not flow directly to them from our tradition, as they are said to do by the piggyback analysis. Thus a Methodist or a Muslim might believe that God has brought it about that the law of Karma has a salvation-bestowing capability. Or a Christian who believes that if Christ had not risen from the dead, there would be no salvation for anyone might also believe that an individual Jew can receive salvation through participation in the Jewish tradition—with whatever capacity to produce salvation that is possessed within Judaism being ultimately traceable to the death and resurrection of Jesus. John Hick discusses this sort of salvific inclusivism, and his example is, in fact, the Christian one—though he introduces it only to point out what he considers to be the profound deficiencies, nay, the thoroughgoing unacceptability ("bizarre," "arbitrary," "contrived") of this sort of inclusivism:

> It is by living in accordance with the Torah or with the Qur'anic revelation that Jews and Muslims find a transforming peace with God; it is by one of their great *margas* that Hindus attain to *moksha*; it is by the Eightfold Path that Theravada Buddhists come to *nirvana*; it is by *zazen* that Zen Buddhists attain to *satori*; and so on. The Christian inclusivist is, then, by implication, declaring that these various spiritual paths are efficacious, and constitute authentic contexts of salvation, because

> Jesus died on the cross; and, by further implication, that if he had not died on the cross they would not be efficacious. ("Religious Pluralism and Salvation," in Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker, eds., *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, 65)

According to the *derivative powers* view, our tradition is superior because it is the source of the derivative salvific capacity of whatever other traditions have any such capacity. So what we have here has much in common with the piggyback analysis, although it is distinct from it in the obvious way that arises from assuming that there are a number of salvific routes and that outsiders who benefit salvifically from our tradition do so via the mediation of their own tradition.

An advocate of the best route version of inclusivism need not subscribe to the derivative powers idea—though if she does so, she is doubly inclusivistic. On the other hand, an advocate of the derivative powers idea is, in effect, subscribing to the best route idea in that she is saying that one route is best in the important respect that it is the source of the salvific capacity of the others.

The inclusivistic idea of derivative salvific capacities can be conceived of in a variety of ways. There is the idea that the secondary tradition—the one that derives its power from our tradition—actually now has its own, albeit conferred, mechanism of salvation. It is as if a source of heat warms something else that in turn becomes a source of heat. Or our tradition lights the salvific lamps of others, but their lamps now burn independently. In that case, once the derivative mechanism is in place, its operation does not require the continued involvement of the power that gave rise to it. This is, I think, the most natural way to read IS10. But then there is the quite different idea that the primary power is continuing to work through the secondary power. This would, I think, be a less natural way to read IS10, but it is not out of the question. Of these two, the latter, with its suggestion that power is still being exercised by the originating tradition, is closer to the piggyback view than is the former, which assumes the relative autonomy of the derivative powers. Yet another reading, distinct from these two, would have it that the idea of derivative power is best formulated in a somewhat Platonic way as involving the idea that the secondary derivative traditions participate in the primary tradition that is the source of its power.

The inclusivistic idea of derived salvific capacity is one case of a more general position, namely, that there are aspects or features of any sort that are good or true or worthy (etc.) in other religious traditions (and perhaps in various secular traditions), but these aspects derive from or even belong to our tradition. Actually, the view that everything that is worthwhile is ours might be considered a form of exclusivism, given its claim to ownership of all that is good. There are a range of subtly different options here, as exemplified by these remarks:

> [The] sacred books of other religions, which in actual fact direct and nourish the existence of their followers, receive from the mystery of Christ the elements of goodness and grace which they contain. (*Dominus Iesus*, section 8)

> [Early] Christianity [considered] itself as . . . as the all-inclusive religion in the sense of the saying: "All that is true anywhere in the world belongs to us, the Christians." (Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1963], 34–35)

> To be [a Christian and to be] inclusive is to believe that all non-Christian religious truth belongs ultimately to Christ and the way of discipleship which springs from him. . . . (Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982], 38)

Here are three more general thoughts about the possibilities introduced so far. First, we might think of the piggyback and anonymous approaches, according to which there is a single route to salvation, as closed inclusivism about salvation or as versions of it. We might think of the best route and derivative powers views, according to both of which there are many routes to salvation, as open inclusivism about salvation or as versions of it.

Second, I am not assuming that the various views according to which there are multiple routes say that if a tradition delivers salvation, it does so only for its own members. The best route view, for example, is to be read so that it is left open whether some or all of the traditions that deliver salvation permit outsiders to that particular tradition to piggyback along. Indeed, the availability of a route to outsiders might be considered one of the things that is good about it.

Third, I consider all of the approaches introduced so far as versions of inclusivism about salvation to be such partly because they all endorse IS1. They all say that outsiders can be saved. In this, they all differ from exclusivism about salvation, as we have defined it. But unlike pluralism, they do not put members of our tradition and members of other traditions on a par in terms of salvation. Compared with us, the others in question are second-class, so to speak, in that, for example, they are relying on our mechanisms rather than their own or their route is not as good as ours. So all of the approaches introduced so far endorse IS2 as well. Here, as in many other areas we are looking at, though, there are alternative ways to map the terrain. For example, if we were to define exclusivism about salvation as ES1, exclusivism about the means, instead of as the combination of ES1 and ES2, then a form of single-routism such as the piggyback view, which I have characterized as a version of inclusivism about salvation, would instead be a form of exclusivism about salvation.

Best Seat in the House and Best Show in Town

Next, I consider another motif, one that provides another analysis of IS1 and IS2. The central idea is that members of our group can do better in the sense that:

> IS11 We can achieve a better quality of salvation than can be achieved by others.

Those who make such a claim obviously think in terms of better and worse forms of salvation.[10] They think that there are features or qualities that make for goodness in salvific destinations and that any destination associated with their tradition is superior to those associated with other traditions. Religious traditions that think along these lines will have their own ideas about what these features or qualities would be. Possible candidates for inclusion in a discussion of such features might be the duration of salvation, its capacity to foster the flourishing of all beings found therein in the deepest and richest ways in which they are capable of flourishing (which might be a matter of enjoying greater knowledge, greater wisdom, or a higher level of bliss, for instance), and, to turn to a candidate that is likely to be mentioned in theistic contexts, a more intimate relationship with God.

Actually, there are a couple of somewhat different positions here. There is the idea that there is a single salvation but it contains within it different locations or levels, with the occupants of some of these better or worse off than the occupants of others. So others are admitted, but we alone qualify for the best seats. Related to, but distinct from, this is the idea that others can enjoy a form of salvation that is inferior to ours and that involves an entirely different destination from ours. Here the most apt parallel is not with having the best seats in the house but rather having access to the best show in town, with there being other shows that are good but not as good as ours. To say that there are a number of salvations might be to say that, for instance, some people will, or at least can, go to heaven, others can achieve moksha, others can reach Nirvana, and so on,

10. Mormonism is one tradition that endorses this idea. "There are three kingdoms of glory: the celestial, the terrestrial, and the telestial. Latter-Day Saints believe that those who attain the highest level in the celestial kingdom become gods, receive exaltation, and are joint heirs with Christ of all that the Father has. . . . The inhabitants of the terrestrial kingdom are described as the honorable people of the earth who received a testimony of Jesus but were not sufficiently valiant in that testimony to obey all the principles and ordinances of the gospel. . . . Those who on earth are liars, sorcerers, whoremongers, and adulterers, who receive not the gospel, or the testimony of Jesus, or the prophets, go to the telestial kingdom" (Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* [New York: Macmillan, 1992], 1:367, 369). While it is inferior to the celestial and the terrestrial, the telestial kingdom still "surpasses all understanding" (369). Thanks to Jeff Peterson for advice on this topic.

though obviously the point can be made without mentioning the salvations that are posited by existing traditions. And this is not because these are all names for, or ways of referring to, the same state or the like; on the contrary, these distinct states somehow coexist.[11] Intuitively, there is a distinction between a number of levels in a single salvation and a number of salvations, some of which are better than others.[12] The assumption in both cases, though, is that something of ours is best, whether it is our seats or our show—our place within a single salvation or our salvation relative to the salvation of others.

I think of these themes as adding up to a distinct version of inclusivism about salvation because while they allow that others may achieve salvation, they also say that the others in question are in a particular respect second-class citizens in terms of salvation. And the particular respect in question is different from all of those considered in earlier sections of this chapter. Or rather, what we have here may reasonably be classified as inclusivism, provided that two additional conditions are met. First, we need to assume that having the best seats or attending the best show confers a significant advantage. If members of other traditions were thought to achieve everything that is important about salvation, with the disadvantages that come from having poor-quality seats, for example, being therefore of little consequence, so that even with poor-quality seats one can, so to speak, still fully enjoy the show, what we have probably should be thought of as a version of *pluralism* about salvation or as a central component thereof. Second, we need to assume that the advantage conferred (by the best seat or best show) is not too significant. If the relevant situation of others is greatly inferior to ours, what we have probably should be thought of as a version of *exclusivism* about salvation or as a central component thereof.

Perhaps this motif is less complete and more in need of rounding out than the other approaches we have considered. After all, there would have to be an explanation of *why* others are not as well situated in the particular respect under consideration here. That might have to do, say, with the inferiority of their route or with the fact that while they avail of our route, they are less well positioned than we are to do so, or it could have to do with other factors. So we might think of this idea of others being worse off in the respects discussed in this section as an inclusivistic idea or theme rather than a stand-alone version of salvific inclusivism.

11. The only extended discussion of this possibility that I am aware of is S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), especially chapter 5.

12. Further content might perhaps be given to this distinction in terms of whether communication from one location to another would be possible. So we could distinguish (1) different levels within a single salvation, among which communication would be understood to be possible, and (2) different salvations, among which communication would not be understood to be possible or would be understood to be more difficult, or the like.

My own inclination, though, is to think that what we have here is robust enough to be classified as a distinct reading of inclusivism. Someone might assert IS11, thereby implicitly giving expression to both IS1 and IS2, but be uncertain as to the explanation of how it is that IS11 is true. And I am inclined to classify such a person as an inclusivist.[13]

As mentioned, either the idea of different levels within a single salvific destination or the idea of different salvific destinations can be combined with the best route idea so that our tradition not only provides the best route (in some sense or other) but also provides a better sort of salvation.[14] Yet another possibility is that the idea of the best destination might be proposed as an additional way to interpret the notion of the best route or as one element thereof. In that case, what is best about our route or part of what is best about it would be that it takes you to the best destination. In addition, either the idea of different levels within a single salvific destination or the idea of different salvific destinations is compatible with single-routism, as exemplified by the piggyback approach, for example. The idea would be that others can avail themselves of our route but that the benefits to them of doing so would be less than the benefits to us.

On Understanding Others Better Than They Understand Themselves

The idea that we understand the salvific status of others better than they understand it themselves has surfaced frequently in the course of our discussion of the various forms of inclusivism about salvation—so much so that I have wondered if this idea might not be thought of as a third condition alongside the two conditions (IS1 and IS2) that I suggested, at the start of this chapter, are shared by all forms of inclusivism about salvation and are definitive of this option.

13. However, the issue of how robust and how ramified a view needs to be to be classified as a form of inclusivism, or of any other relevant "ism," is an interesting area to consider in its own right. Suppose, for example, that someone is open to the possibility that outsiders can be saved but has no further views on the matter. Perhaps such a view is best thought of as an undeveloped or underdetermined inclusivism.

14. We find a combination of this sort in these remarks in which DiNoia quotes from the Buddhist scholar Phra Khantipalo. Khantipalo is commenting on the implications for "other teachings" of the Buddha's statement that the Eightfold Path is the best path and the Four Noble Truths the best truths. "[Though] there are many teachings in the world, they lead either in directions opposed to Nirvana (materialism, Communism), or, at most, only to the lower heavens gained by good works (and open therefore to the laymen of all religions) or to the highest states of bliss (attainable by the saints of, for instance, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam)" (DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions*, 4–5). The bliss that is achievable by the saints and that is mentioned in the last sentence, while superior to the "lower heavens gained by good works," still falls short of liberation from rebirth.

There is no question that all five of the approaches we have considered (the piggyback analysis, anonymous membership, the best route analysis, the idea of derivative powers, and the ideas represented by the best seat in the house and best show in town approaches) involve the idea that we understand important aspects of what is going on in the matter of others' salvation better than those others understand it. We have important insights into their situation that they themselves lack and that are relevant to our position being classified as inclusivism. We understand, for example, the mechanism through which others can achieve salvation, or we understand that they are actually anonymous members of our tradition, or we understand that the routes of others are inferior to our route, or we understand that while they can achieve salvation, they can never achieve as good a form of salvation as we can achieve. The putative relevant failures to understand that others are thought to suffer from naturally vary somewhat in their character. They include the major failure to understand themselves correctly that we impute to others if we say that they are really anonymous members of our tradition and the less pervasive failure that we impute to them if we adopt, say, the best seat in the house analysis. In the latter case, they can understand correctly that they can achieve salvation and even perhaps how it is that they do so. What they are missing is that there is an even better form of salvation that they are unable to achieve.

However, while an inclusivist about salvation is indeed someone who claims to understand outsiders who are included better than those outsiders understand themselves in some significant respect or set of respects, exclusivists about salvation also think that they understand others better than they understand themselves. And if we adopt a pluralist position toward others who are not themselves pluralists, in this case, too, we are endorsing the idea that we understand those others better (with respect to salvation or in some other respect) than they understand themselves. What is unique to inclusivism is not that we believe ourselves to understand outsiders better than they understand themselves but *what* we believe ourselves to understand about them. It is the fact that we understand them in ways such as those suggested by the foregoing proposals that leads us to classify our approach to them as inclusivistic—not the fact that we understand others better than they understand themselves per se. Hence I am not inclined to add the idea of understanding others better than they understand themselves as a third factor that would be definitive of inclusivism.

Actually, there is a way to think of our understanding others better than they understand themselves, in particular on a critical matter such as salvation, as something concerning which the question does not arise whether it should be *added* to the analysis of inclusivism about salvation whose key ingredients are IS1 and IS2. What I have in mind is just that our understanding others on the matter of salvation might reasonably be thought of as a respect in which

others would not be as well situated as we are with respect to salvation and hence as one aspect of the second component (IS2) we have already identified. It is we who understand them in the relevant respect, and not the other way around. This, too, speaks in favor of not thinking of our having here a third component in inclusivism. But the refrain bears repeating: there are other ways to go.

Additional Variations, Observations, and Possibilities

My notion of inclusivism about salvation is itself an inclusive view in an important respect. Exclusivism about salvation, I proposed in chapter 4, is best understood as the combination of ES1 and ES2, exclusivism about the means and exclusivism about the beneficiaries. I am characterizing inclusivism about salvation as involving a rejection of exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation. Such a rejection can take various forms. In the case of the piggyback view, exclusivism about the means is preserved, but the means of salvation is available to others. Hence the piggyback view is counted as a form of inclusivism, even though it is, in an important respect, exclusivistic. The best route view involves a denial of exclusivism about the means, and *that* is what rules out exclusivism about the beneficiaries. (However, as explained, the connection is not a logical one, there being nothing contradictory about the idea that there are many routes but that we alone are the beneficiaries of all of them.)

One could, instead, take inclusivism about salvation to involve a rejection of both exclusivisms[15]—just as we have taken exclusivism to consist in the endorsement of both. In that case, you would need some other name for the combination of exclusivism about the means with rejection of exclusivism about the beneficiaries. However, since this combination is often exactly what people mean by "inclusivism about salvation" (or even by "inclusivism" tout court), that would not seem to be the best way to proceed. Really, though, here as elsewhere, there are various reasonable ways to divide things up, and how we do so is to some extent a matter of choice.

My notion of salvific inclusivism is inclusive in another respect. It extends over two distinct subject matters, so much so that each could have had its own chapter. First, there is the topic of how to include individual outsiders, and second, there is the topic of how to include other traditions. Thus discussion of the piggyback approach pertains to outsiders as such. On the other hand, discussion of the best

15. The view that inclusivism about salvation would *involve* a rejection of both exclusivisms should not be confused with the completely implausible view that inclusivism about salvation *consists in* a rejection of both exclusivisms. Pluralism about salvation, whatever exactly it may amount to, will also share this particular combination.

route approach and of derivative powers pertains to other traditions. These are closely related topics, but they are distinct for the obvious reason that outsiders may not belong to any religious tradition.[16]

Yet, in another respect, the question arises whether we are being inclusive enough. In particular, are we being comprehensive enough in our presentation of varieties of inclusivism? Here, for example, is another inclusivistic motif that I have toyed with including as a distinct reading of inclusivism about salvation. This is the idea that other traditions, unbeknownst to their members, are aiming at a salvific goal that we correctly understand and that is somehow uniquely associated with our tradition. Let's refer to this as the teleological approach since it says that other traditions are aimed at our goal. On that account, the members of those traditions are not as well situated as we are with respect to salvation: for one thing, it is our goal that they are aiming at. An important question pertaining to any attempt to articulate a view of this sort will be how it has come about that other traditions are geared toward the pursuit of "our" salvific good. A full theory in this area will need to provide an analysis of this putative fact.

DiNoia actually sees this teleological proposal as one of two ideas that are definitive of salvific inclusivism. Looking at the matter from a Christian perspective, he says that inclusivist positions affirm "not only that non-Christian persons can achieve salvation but also that their communities aim, though haltingly, at salvation as Christians understand it" (*The Diversity of Religions*, 48). He says that "salvation as Christians understand it is in some sense what most religions seek, at least insofar as they express their adherents' grace-endowed present orientation to this aim" (38) and that those other traditions "hiddenly or partially pursue what the Christian community pursues explicitly and fully, at least insofar as they permit the expression of their members' possible orientation to grace and salvation" (41; see also ix, 37).[17]

There are many possible variations on this theme and many additional elements that it might include. Thus it might be proposed that there are various telltale signs that another tradition is aimed at our salvific good. Or it might be

16. Comments from Emily Ansusinha have helped me think about this topic. Incidentally, another respect in which the approach is inclusivistic is that the "success" reading of all of the positions canvassed, which has it that outsiders not merely can achieve salvation but in addition actually do so, is to be understood to be available in each case.

17. Another example: Richard Plantinga proposes that Christians should see non-Christian religions neither as "areas of complete darkness" nor as "equally efficacious paths to the divine" but instead as "legitimate products of revelation with a proper—that is to say, divinely ordained—point of departure but in need of further divine light to come to their proper *telos*" ("God So Loved the World, 134). Plantinga is, I think, talking about non-Christian religions in their entirety, but I assume that he means these remarks to have a bearing on their salvific efficacy, among other things.

proposed that members of the other traditions in question are striving for the good in question, albeit unbeknownst to themselves. The suggestion may also be that the outsiders in question exhibit some inchoate awareness of the good in question. In any case, this teleological theme is distinct from all of the foregoing motifs—the piggyback approach and all of the others. It represents yet another respect in which outsiders are not as well situated with respect to salvation as we are: they are aiming for a goal that is in an important sense uniquely associated with our tradition. In addition, given this scenario, we would understand better than others what is going on with them: we see that their tradition is geared toward the achievement of what we correctly and uniquely understand to be the salvific goal.

Quite apart from additional full-blown varieties of inclusivism that we might add to the list, here is another fascinating area of inquiry. This is the idea that while various traditions other than one's own do not provide distinct full-fledged routes to salvation, they are not lacking in usefulness in this area, and they can play a contributing role.[18] Perhaps they can serve to remove obstacles to salvation. Perhaps they provide some preliminary or preparatory training, some helpful exhortation or encouragement. Perhaps achieving salvation involves, or can involve, a set of steps or stages, and some other traditions can take some people through some of those steps or stages. Perhaps some religions can take you a little part of the way, some most of the way. When you ask how it might be that outsiders might make progress toward salvation while remaining outsiders, there is much to consider. One obvious possibility is that there would be truths that are relevant to salvation in some way that are discoverable to some outsiders. Or—to consider a theistic possibility—some outsiders might be thought to be receptive to the voice of God in some fashion or other. For example, Alston-type direct perception of God might be available even to those whose conceptual apparatus does not equip them to understand what they are perceiving. Or the issue might be a change in attitude, a changed orientation, something that can be occurring even while one is oblivious to its cause or its significance or even the fact that it is occurring. In each case, what we are considering is something

18. Consider this, for example: Some "prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel, in that they are occasions or pedagogical helps in which the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God" (*Dominus Iesus*, section 21). DiNoia remarks that the Second Vatican Council "encouraged Christians to recognize that other religions can prepare the way for the acceptance of the Gospel" (*The Diversity of Religions*, 27). Recall, too, these interesting remarks from C. S. Lewis: "There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it" (*Mere Christianity*, 208–209). And this: "A Buddhist of good will may be led to concentrate more and more on the Buddhist teaching about mercy and to leave in the background (though he might still say he believed) the Buddhist teaching on certain other points. Many of the good Pagans long before Christ's birth may have been in this position" (Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 209).

that may be a step in the direction of achieving salvation. The possibility under discussion is that another tradition might facilitate such steps.

The manifold forms that all such contributing factors might take is a potentially interesting area of inquiry. In fact, there are so many ways in which other traditions might be thought to facilitate the salvific process and to do partially and less completely what our tradition does more fully that it would take considerable effort to defend the position that there is nothing at all that is salvifically helpful in traditions other than one's own. There are many ways to avoid saying that other traditions are salvifically useless. In addition, as indicated, there is also the possibility that outsiders who are not members of other traditions and who are solo operators, as it were, might be thought to make such progress.

The idea that other traditions might contribute salvifically while not constituting distinct routes to salvation has an interesting set of connections with the best route approach and with the piggyback approach. It agrees with the former that other traditions have some salvific value, though it rejects the best route implication that—at least as we interpreted this motif—on their own they have enough salvific capability to suffice for salvation. And it agrees with the piggyback analysis that others must avail themselves of the salvific resources of our tradition since their own resources, while not worthless, do not suffice. (Or at least it agrees with the latter that others must avail themselves of the salvific resources of our tradition, provided that our tradition is the only one that can remedy the relevant deficiencies of others.) In addition, the capacity to contribute salvifically might be thought of as a derivative power: there would be a logic to this combination in that the lower capacity of the tradition whose relevant capacity has been conferred would exhibit its derivative status. So in this area, too, there are interesting possible combinations to explore. Indeed, the full variety of ways in which the approaches that have been distinguished might be combined is a fitting subject for additional inquiry. So there is a long story to be told about the full variety of forms of inclusivism about salvation and of inclusivistic themes with a bearing on salvation. These provide a panoply of possibilities.

There is also the possibility of a different sort of combination: this would involve taking different approaches in the case of different traditions or even different individuals. For example, it seems that one could sensibly take the piggyback view with respect to some outsiders, perhaps to members of some other traditions, and the best route approach in other cases, so that one combines both in a coherent point of view. And it could be that, say, only two or three other routes to salvation are regarded as viable, while a few additional traditions are believed to make a contribution of some sort in the area of salvation, and while still other traditions do not help at all with respect to salvation. And so on.

The term *inclusivism* is not without use. Broadly speaking, there are reasons to count, say, the piggyback approach and the best route approach as versions of

inclusivism rather than as, say, versions of exclusivism. To revert to an earlier theme, we could think of these and of the various other inclusivistic options I have discussed as successor concepts to inclusivism, and hence of the terms we use to refer to them as successor terms to *inclusivism*. But I see the relevant concepts and terms as tools that enable us to dig more deeply and be more precise.

Dominus Iesus: A Statement of Inclusivism?

Dominus Iesus was at least in part a product of an attempt to resist perceived attempts to depict all religions as equal. This objective is reflected in such remarks as this: "it would be contrary to the faith to consider the Church as *one way* of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions, seen as complementary to the Church or substantially equivalent to her" (section 21). Of course, to deny equality is to say something that is compatible with all forms of exclusivism and with all forms of inclusivism, which all deny that our tradition is on a par with other traditions, whether the issue be truth, salvation, or something else.

This document contains a number of strands. The following remark seems in line with the derivative power sort of inclusivism about salvation, at least with respect to non-Catholic Christian denominations:

> [Other Christian denominations] derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Roman Catholic Church. (Section 16; this is also a quotation from the Second Vatican Council)

Here it is conceded that other denominations within Christianity, at any rate, have some salvific efficacy, even if they derive it from the Roman Catholic tradition, or at least from the "very fullness of grace and truth entrusted" thereto, which may not be exactly the same thing. Ideas along the same lines are perhaps being mentioned here, although this time the scope of the relevant claim appears to be far wider than Christian denominations, and this could be taken to suggest something along the lines of the piggyback view as the focus is not on traditions per se but rather on individuals: "The Church is the 'universal sacrament of salvation,' since, united always in a mysterious way to the Savior Jesus Christ, her Head, and subordinated to Him, she has, in God's plan, an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being. For those who are not formally and visibly members of the Church, 'salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation'" (section 20).

The idea that other religions can serve as vehicles through which grace is mediated (albeit grace that has a special "mysterious relationship to the Church") is consistent with additional positive remarks about those other religions. The following remarks from section 8, which is devoted to the question of whether, and in what way, the sacred writings of other traditions are inspired, mention that other religions make present "the fullness of [God's] revelation and love," even if they do so in a less than fully satisfactory way.

> God, who desires to call all peoples to himself in Christ and to communicate to them the fullness of his revelation and love, "does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals, but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression even when they contain 'gaps, insufficencies and errors.'"[19] Therefore, the sacred books of other religions, which in actual fact direct and nourish the existence of their followers, receive from the mystery of Christ the elements of goodness and grace which they contain.

Other traditions, then, have important positive features. They have "spiritual riches" and their sacred books "in actual fact direct and nourish the existence of their followers." Yet whatever is good about these other traditions is "[received] from the mystery of Christ."

We also find these remarks that seem to signify openness to different interpretations of how the derivative powers operate and, once again, broadly speaking reflect favorably on other traditions:

> The Second Vatican Council, in fact, has stated that "the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude, but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a participation in this one source." The content of this participated mediation should be explored more deeply, but must remain always consistent with the principle of Christ's unique mediation: "Although participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded, they acquire meaning and value *only* from Christ's own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his."[20] (Section 14)

Those traditions that cooperate with and participate in Christ's mediation are not "parallel or complementary" to Christ's mediation. However, if "parallel"

19. The quoted passage includes parts of sentences from John Paul II's Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio* and from Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangeli nuntiandi*.

20. The second quotation is from John Paul II's Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*.

means something like "equally effective as" or "on a par with," and "complementary" means something like "fulfilling additional purposes," then these remarks leave unexplored, and are consistent with, the idea that the participating forms of mediation that are present in other traditions, while *less* effective than Christ's mediation, are, in virtue of their derivative capacity, still somewhat effective at achieving the purpose that Christ's mediation is understood to achieve. Another noteworthy feature of this part of *Dominus Iesus* is its pleasing openness to further exploration of what is involved in the relevant sort of participation. This is combined in the text with an invitation "to explore if and in what way the historical figures and positive elements of [other] religions may fall within the divine plan of salvation" (section 14).[21] The implication is that it is worthwhile to sift through the teachings, major figures, and presumably other aspects, too, of other traditions with a view to identifying their positive elements.

The participating forms of mediation are also said to "acquire meaning and value only from Christ's mediation." The exact implications of this are elusive, but the important question is this: how much power do the derivative powers have? Are they really *powers* or just vehicles through which power is exercised? The very usage of the term *powers* suggests that they can actually *do* something, and the something in question must have to do with salvation. What we have here may therefore be a form of inclusivism about salvation that endorses exclusivism about the means of salvation. Or it may involve a rejection of exclusivism about the means—in which case the traditions that have derivative powers have *their own* (albeit derivative) power. There are various possibilities.

As noted before, the idea of derivative powers here is combined with the idea of the "unique mediation of the Redeemer." The following two remarks emphasize the same idea of uniqueness, and perhaps they are also consistent with the idea that other traditions have some derivative power, although at first glance they certainly do give a different impression:

> There is only one salvific economy of the one and triune God, realized in the mystery of the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son of God, actualized with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, and extended in its salvific value to all humanity and to the entire universe; "No one,

21. Incidentally, talk of a "unique mediation" of the redeemer could mean either that the redeemer is the only one who mediates or that the way in which (or the ease with which, etc.) the redeemer mediates is different from other such ways of mediating. I take the correct reading to be the former one. The uniqueness in question is further clarified thus: "this uniqueness of Christ . . . gives him an absolute and universal significance whereby, while belonging to history, he remains history's centre and goal" (section 15). So the idea is, I think, that the derivative powers of salvation are all traceable back to the mediation of Jesus. I take this to be the meaning, also, of this remark: "For us men and for our salvation, he came down and became incarnate, was made man, suffered, and rose again on the third day. . . . In him God reconciled us to himself and to one another . . ." (section 10).

> therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit." (Section 12)

> Jesus Christ has a significance and a value for the human race and its history, which are unique and singular, proper to him alone, exclusive, universal, and absolute. Jesus is, in fact, the Word of God made man for the salvation of all. (Section 15)

These passages seem to express exclusivism about the means of salvation. They give the impression that if other traditions are involved in the salvific process, they serve at most as vehicles through which salvific effects are channeled. Still, perhaps it makes sense to read these remarks in light of the acknowledgment elsewhere of "derivative powers."

In any case, what we have so far involves openness to the salvation of non-Christians—that is, a rejection of exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation—and in general a positive attitude to other religions. Additional passages such as this reinforce this impression of openness to the salvation of non-Christians:

> [The] salvific action of Jesus Christ, with and through his Spirit, extends beyond the visible boundaries of the Church to all humanity. Speaking of the paschal mystery, in which Christ even now associates the believer to himself in a living manner in the spirit and gives him the hope of resurrection, the Council states: "All this holds true not only for Christians but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. . . ." (Section 12)

Yet we also find in this document what appear to be more exclusivistic elements:

> If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that, objectively speaking, *they are in a gravely deficient situation* in comparison with those who, in the church, have the fullness of the means of salvation. (Section 22, my emphasis)

Naturally, one wants to know: in what respect are the followers of religions other than Catholic Christianity to be understood to be worse off? Maybe it is a matter of their not understanding, or not understanding properly, the process through which they can receive salvation. Maybe the idea is that their way of receiving salvation is inferior, being a derivative one. But why would any of that result in, say, Anglicans or Jews or Muslims being in a "*gravely* deficient" situation? "Deficient," maybe, but "gravely deficient"? After all, they could in that case achieve salvation—even if that salvation is traceable, in one way or another, back to the church. Perhaps it is a matter of its being much harder for those without the

church to achieve salvation. But it is hard not to see exclusivism about the beneficiaries lurking behind the words *gravely deficient*. Indeed, we find what seem to be clear indications of exclusivism about the beneficiaries elsewhere in the document, starting with the very first sentence:

> The Lord Jesus, before ascending into heaven, commanded his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world and to baptize all nations: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; he who does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16: 15–16)

The biblical remark that "he who does not believe will be condemned" seems to be a statement of the belief requirement and hence of exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation. What has become of the derivative powers?

Moreover, the missionary endeavor of the church is emphasized throughout *Dominus Iesus*. The mission of the church is "to proclaim and establish among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is on earth, the seed and the beginning of that kingdom" (section 18). (The quotation is from the Second Vatican Council.) Section 2 mentions "the evangelizing mission of the Church, above all in connection with the religious traditions of the world." This seems to say that the mission is to see that members of other traditions are converted to the church. But if those other traditions are derivative sources of salvation, why go to the trouble? Would it not be better to try to persuade people who belong to no religion to join one of the others—assuming it has some, or at least enough, of the aforementioned powers? It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the commitment to the missionary project needs to be rethought in the light of the derivative powers theme.[22]

The two strands I have distinguished both provide ways to read the idea, central throughout this document, of "a single divine economy" (section 13 and *passim*). But there seem to be two very different—indeed, apparently inconsistent—themes present here. My general impression, therefore, is of a document

22. As mentioned in chapter1, *Dominus Iesus* may suggest in the following passage that non-Christian traditions are purely human creations, which would be to provide a very negative assessment of them, an assessment that in turn would be difficult to reconcile with the apparently positive estimates of those traditions that we have seen above: "Faith . . . [is] '*a gift of God*' and '*a supernatural virtue infused by him*' [and] is the acceptance in grace of revealed truth, which 'makes it possible to penetrate the mystery in a way that allows us to understand it coherently. . . .' [On the other hand] belief, in the other religions, is that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute" (section 7). However, the meaning of this is unclear. There may, for example, be room for a distinction between the *belief* that is to be found in other traditions (and that apparently is to be accounted for without reference to any divine or supernatural involvement) and other aspects of other traditions, such as the aforementioned derivative powers (which would be accounted for in quite a different way).

that contains a number of strands. At times, there almost seems to be a studied ambiguity, providing room for different constituencies to make different interpretations. This is, in any case, a document that combines in interesting ways many of the foregoing themes—hence my attention to it.[23]

Package Deals

I have generally dealt separately with the issues of truth and salvation, as I have found this to be the most useful way to proceed. However, to draw this chapter to a close, I will make a couple of comments on some connections between them.

First, consider the piggyback analysis. If, in accordance with this proposal, our tradition is the one that others rely on for their salvation, it would be peculiar if our tradition did not also do better in terms of truth than other traditions. It would be peculiar, in that case, if our tradition were merely on a par with them or, more peculiar still, inferior to them in this respect. Likewise, one would expect to be open to learning something from other traditions that are thought to have a significant salvific capacity—as in the best route view, for example. If another route is as much as somewhat effective in terms of salvation, there is something about it in virtue of which this is so. It would be natural to be open to the possibility that we might learn something from them. To sum it up, one would anticipate that the performance of a tradition in one area would not be entirely irrelevant to its performance in other areas. The connections in these cases may not be logical ones but rather are along the lines of what it makes sense to suppose.

Second, I want to discharge a promise to revisit the possibility of forms of salvific exclusivism that would be open in a way that would be akin to the openness that is characteristic of the more open forms of exclusivism about truth. Now we have a vocabulary to do so. So we might use the term *open exclusivism* in the context of discussing salvation to refer to the combination of exclusivism about the means with a more open view on the beneficiaries—as exemplified in the piggyback approach. Or we might use this term to refer to the possibility that other traditions can take you a good part of the way to salvation, even though a contribution from us is also necessary. These would be perfectly fine ways to use this term. Here as elsewhere, a certain arbitrariness, a measure of opting for one construction when there are others available that are about as good, or close to being as good, is unavoidable.

23. For additional analysis from many perspectives of *Dominus Iesus*, a good place to begin is Stephen J. Pope and Charles Hefling, eds., *Sic et Non: Encountering Dominus Iesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).

6

Pluralism

Pluralism about Truth

Let's start by considering some pluralistic remarks. The renowned contemporary Iranian Muslim philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush was quoted as follows a few years ago:

> Some say the only right path is Islam, and the rest stray or are on a deviant path. But I argue that there are many right paths. I try to justify a pluralistic view of religions—the internal sects of Sunni, Shia, and others, and also the great religions, like Christianity, Judaism, and the rest. We think they go to Hell, and they think we go to Hell. . . . But I'm trying to say that Christians and members of other religions are well guided and good servants of God. All are equally rightful in what they believe. (From an interview with Robin Wright reported in "Letter from Teheran: We Invite the Hostages to Return," *New Yorker*, November 8, 1999, 47)

And Ramakrishna, the nineteenth-century Hindu thinker, has said the following:

> God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times, and countries. All doctrines are only so many paths . . . one can reach God if one follows any of the paths with whole-hearted devotion . . . the one Everlasting-Intelligent-Bliss is invoked by some as God, by some as Allah, by some as Jehovah, and by others as Brahman. . . . (Quoted by Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001], 106)

These remarks from Soroush and Ramakrishna certainly have pluralistic elements. Soroush even states explicitly that his view is pluralistic. He mentions by name only the major monotheistic religions, but he says that his pluralistic view

also pertains to the rest of the great religions. Soroush's remarks also pertain both to truth and to salvation, and this may be so, too, in the case of Ramakrishna's remarks. Then again, the quoted remarks in both cases seem to privilege a theistic framework.

How is pluralism best understood? Let's start with truth. It is natural to begin a discussion of pluralism about truth by considering a claim such as this:

PT1 A number of religions do equally well in terms of truth.

As is clear from earlier discussions, the idea that a number of religions do equally well in terms of truth admits of further clarification. For example, there is the percentage of the claims of the relevant traditions that are correct, the total number of truths that they possess, and so on. But I will not revisit these matters here. And as before, in this discussion, too, I will sometimes drop the words "about truth."

Some scholars take PT1 to *be* pluralism about truth. Thus Harold Netland takes religious pluralism, which he reasonably characterizes as a position concerning both truth and salvation, to be the view that "there is rough parity among religions concerning truth and soteriological (salvational) effectiveness" (*Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission*, 12). And as we have just seen, Abdolkarim Soroush says that "[all] are equally rightful in what they believe," and he presents this as part of his "pluralistic" position.

However, the relevant traditions might do equally well in terms of truth (might be equally true) and yet not do all *that* well in this respect—just as there can be, say, many equally impressive politicians without there being any very impressive politicians. We need to add something to the effect that the traditions in question not only do equally well in terms of truth but also do extremely well in this respect. Actually, given the way I have classified the various positions considered so far, the view that our tradition and others do equally well with none of them doing that well does not have a place in the discussion. It is neither inclusivism nor pluralism, and it certainly is not exclusivism. Having already used up the term *depressing* on a somewhat similar occasion, we might refer to this possibility as *pessimism*, or as one example of pessimism, if we wanted a name for it.

In addition, if what we have is to be plausibly construed as a statement of pluralism, we need to exclude explicitly the possibility that any other tradition does *better* in terms of truth than the many traditions to which PT1 alludes. Strictly speaking, there could be a number of religions that do equally well but only fairly well, or even equally well and very well, while there is one, or even a few, that do spectacularly well in this regard. Moreover, PT1 does not say explicitly that our tradition is among the equally true traditions. There could be some, or many, that do equally well while the one that is of special interest to us,

namely, our own, is not in this group. This might be because it is the one that does spectacularly well or, for that matter, because it does especially poorly. The concerns mentioned in this paragraph, needless to say, do not arise if the scope of PT1 extends to *all* traditions—that is, if PT1 is taken to mean that *all* traditions are equally true. But there is no reason to restrict pluralism to cases in which its scope extends to all traditions.

A natural way to modify PT1 in light of these concerns is as follows:

> PT2 Our religion does extremely well in terms of truth; other traditions do equally well, and no tradition does better than we do.

This way of proceeding allows pluralism about truth to be read either as sweeping in its scope, so that it is all other traditions that are being said to do as well as we do, or as restricted in its scope. Is there a minimum number of traditions that must fall within the scope of a proposal for it to be reasonably considered pluralistic? Could it be just, say, three traditions? One relevant consideration, I think, is how different the traditions in question are from each other: the more differences there are among the relevant traditions, the more reasonable it is to count a statement of PT2 with respect to them as a statement of pluralism. Hence if the scope of PT2 were to extend only to, say, the three monotheistic traditions, which share a considerable number of claims, what we have is less likely to count as pluralism than would be the case if we were dealing with traditions that are utterly different from each other. Even in the case of the monotheistic traditions, however, there certainly is room for pluralism that is limited to particular areas of inquiry, as I will shortly discuss.

Again, we could define things so that only the sweeping view would count as pluralism, but I do not see why we would want to go that way. However, if we allow that the scope of pluralism may be restricted in scope (at all), we are willing to count as a pluralist someone who thinks that some other traditions do not score nearly as well as his tradition and the other traditions that score equally highly. Probably what we should say about such a person, though, is that she is a pluralist with respect to some traditions and something else—perhaps an exclusivist or an inclusivist or just a plain undetermined "something else"—with respect to other traditions.

As indicated, there is also the idea that the competing claims of the traditions with respect to some particular limited area of inquiry are equally true. I will refer to this as "limited pluralism about truth." Limited pluralism, to be more exact, says:

> PT3 With respect to its claims about some limited area of inquiry, our religion does extremely well in terms of truth; other traditions do equally well, and no tradition does better than we do (in this respect).

By way of example, there is pluralism about the truth about salvation:

> PT4 With respect to its claims about the issue of salvation, our religion does extremely well in terms of truth; other traditions do equally well, and no tradition does better than we do (in this respect).

And there is pluralism concerning the truth about the supreme religious reality:

> PT5 With respect to its claims about the supreme religious reality, our religion does extremely well in terms of truth; other traditions do equally well, and no tradition does better than we do (in this respect).

By "the supreme religious reality," I mean a putative religiously significant dimension of reality or a "religious ultimate." This is a generic way to refer to putative realities such as those variously called "God," "Allah," "Brahman," "Nirvana," "Jahweh," "Vishnu," "Krishna," and so on. Much of my attention in this chapter will be focused on proposals as to how it might be that PT5 could be true. At first glance, it seems unlikely that these terms ("God," "Allah," "Brahman," "Nirvana," and so on) refer to the same reality or state, quite apart from the issue of whether those who variously deploy these terms are all equally correct in their claims about that reality or state. Yet PT5 asserts that this is so. In addition, PT5 asserts that the relevant other accounts of what there is in this area also contain a great deal of truth and are in addition equally true.

These points bring to the fore another feature of pluralism: a position merits this name only if the views whose compatibility it asserts would otherwise seem incompatible. Pluralism is, therefore, an inherently bold, surprising, and controversial view, one that sets out to render compatible what would otherwise seem incompatible. Hence pluralism-like views that pertain to those areas with respect to which the monotheistic religions agree, such as whether there is a deity that is omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent, are not properly classified as pluralistic. However, there can be pluralism that is restricted to such a narrow range of traditions as this but is limited to some area in which the views of the traditions falling within its scope do seem incompatible. In the case of the three major monotheistic traditions, such a restricted and limited pluralism might be proposed concerning the competing interpretations of the significance of Jesus, the Prophet Muhammad, whose revelation is most complete, or any number of other matters concerning which these traditions disagree. Whether any such proposal—which would have it that apparently incompatible views on matters such as these actually are compatible—would be even slightly plausible is another matter entirely.

A limited area with respect to which pluralism is asserted may be an area of great religious significance. So in an important respect, limited pluralism may

not be as limited as it may at first glance appear to be. Indeed, the case of pluralism concerning a supreme religious reality exemplifies this point nicely. There seems to be a tendency for people to think that pluralism about such a reality just *is* full-blown pluralism about truth. I take this to bespeak the importance that is appropriately attached to this particular area of religious concern.

On the face of it, it seems that pluralism is plausible, if it is plausible at all, only if it is limited to an area such as this. It seems implausible to suggest that a significant number of religious traditions, especially all the major traditions, might turn out to be right about everything. Thus it seems that it just can't be true that Hindus, Christians, Muslims, and others are right in thinking that we have a soul and that Buddhists are also right in thinking that we do not have a soul. Christian and Islamic notions of survival of death seem incompatible with the Hindu idea of reincarnation. The Hindu account of the unfolding of the universe seems incompatible with the Jewish and Christian account of creation by God. And so on and so forth. On numerous matters such as these, it seems that either all religious traditions are mistaken *or* one—at most—of the competing positions advocated by the religious traditions is correct. They can't all be right about everything since they contradict each other. However, I will briefly revisit this issue in the section titled "Extending Pluralism."

Alan Race draws attention to another important aspect of pluralism. He defines pluralism thus: "knowledge of God is partial in all faiths, including the Christian. Religions must acknowledge their need of each other if the full truth about God is to be available to mankind" (*Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 72). Race's definition of *pluralism* here is limited to a particular area of inquiry, namely, God, but he makes a point that has broader application. According to pluralism about truth, one can look to the other relevant religious traditions to supplement the account of reality offered by any single tradition, thereby arriving at an account of reality that is more complete than that proposed by any particular tradition. Race is, in effect, highlighting an inclusivist dimension to pluralism. Someone who embraces the full pluralist account will be an inclusivist with respect to the particular accounts of the various traditions that are being accommodated in that account. The truths of any particular tradition, however significant they may be, are incomplete and hence second-class in comparison with the more comprehensive picture offered by pluralism and are incorporated within the comprehensive pluralist analysis.

By enfranchising other traditions, a member of a tradition who comes to endorse pluralism does not exactly thereby disenfranchise his own tradition—assuming he had an antecedently held tradition. But he represents the particular truths of any antecedently held tradition as incomplete and in need of supplementation by what can be learned from other traditions. In addition, his own antecedently held truths are on a par with whatever truths other traditions have to offer. Consequently, the relationship of such a person to his antecedently held

tradition is different from anything discussed in the previous chapters. The alternatives I have discussed in the preceding chapters have been introduced as options that are available to people who belong to, and remain within, a single tradition. Someone who becomes a pluralist, on the other hand, steps out of his own antecedently held tradition in an important respect, taking an inclusivist approach to it when he looks at it from his full pluralist perspective.[1]

This inclusivist dimension to pluralism has an additional important implication that pertains to the meaning of PT2 ("Our religion does extremely well in terms of truth; other traditions do equally well, and no tradition does better than we do") and to the meaning of its more limited applications (as exemplified in PT4 and PT5). What we now see is that compared with the full pluralistic picture that the advocate of PT2 is endorsing, her own antecedently held tradition does quite poorly in terms of truth in a certain respect. What we agree to if we endorse PT2 is that there are whole swaths of reality concerning which we had previously failed to state the truth. And these are, in fact, as extensive and important and so on as the areas in which we did manage to state what is true, with the result that we have about as much to learn from each other tradition that falls within the scope of the hypothesis as it has to learn from us. Hence "does extremely well in terms of truth" in PT2 should be taken to mean something along the lines of "has a very large percentage of views that are true and does as well as a number of other traditions in this regard and is bettered by none in this regard." But "does extremely well in terms of truth" should not be understood along the lines of "manages to state a very large percentage of the relevant views that are true" or even "manages to state a very large percentage of the relevant views that are true and known or believed to be true by some group." In the latter respects, our tradition and all other traditions that do not endorse pluralism and that are accommodated within the pluralist framework fare rather poorly. Actually, someone who asserts PT2 wears two hats. She is a member of a religious tradition, and she believes that tradition to do very well in terms of truth and believes other traditions to do equally well. But she also subscribes to a deeper truth, a metalevel truth that other members of her own tradition, not to mention members of other traditions, may not be aware of. As a pluralist, therefore, she feels she understands the situation of others better than they themselves understand it.

Finally, we can now clarify the attitude that a pluralist should take to the following claims, which were introduced in chapter 2 as two of my "nuggets of common sense":

> N1 Whenever we are correct in believing some proposition p, those who reject p are mistaken (about p).

1. Thanks to Blair Goodlin and John Hawes for comments on this issue.

and

> N2 To believe any proposition p is to be committed also to the view that not-p is false, and hence that anyone who believes not-p is mistaken.

A pluralist need have no difficulty with these or, for that matter, any of the other aforementioned "nuggets." Thus a pluralist is committed to the view that anyone who denies pluralism is mistaken. However, as a pluralist, he is also committed to the view that there are many equally true religions or to some more limited pluralist claim. Hence his view is that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, and whatever may be the explanation of this surprising fact, various views that seem inconsistent actually are consistent. Indeed, they are more than consistent: they are all true. Since this is so, each tradition is not—at least in whatever respects are relevant—rejecting the claims of other traditions. Yet the pluralist—like everyone else who is consistent—contends that anyone who rejects his views is mistaken. He also thinks, however, that some people who *seem* to be rejecting some of his views are not really doing so. In fact, he thinks that both he and they are *correct*.

Convergent and Nonconvergent Pluralism

Under what circumstances would PT5, for example, be true? Kevin Schilbrack has usefully divided pluralistic theories into those that are convergent and those that are nonconvergent.[2] Convergent views say that there is just one reality that (somehow or other) is variously interpreted, in each case correctly. I will look at some proposals along these lines. Nonconvergent views, about which I will say little in what follows, have it that there are many realities of the relevant sort. As Schilbrack puts it, this is the view that "the Hindu . . . [is] right that Brahman is the ultimate reality, the Buddhist . . . [is] also right that emptiness is the ultimate reality, and the Christian . . . [is] right that the Trinity is the ultimate reality."[3]

One attempt to defend the nonconvergent possibility is provided by relativism, which I will here understand as the idea that reality is relative to particular religious traditions, with there being no such thing as reality as it is in itself. It is exceedingly unlikely that this should be so across the board—that is, with respect to all matters of religious significance. Here are two reasons, the first of which is just an appeal to common sense. For example, either God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, or God did not do so. Either we are reincarnated or we are not. Either Jesus was born of a virgin, or Jesus was not born of a

2. Kevin Schilbrack, "The Next Pluralistic Philosophy of Religions" (unpublished).
3. Ibid., 3. Most of Schilbrack's paper is devoted to spelling out some theories of this sort.

virgin. Either Jesus was resurrected, or Jesus was not resurrected. Either Mohammed was the Seal of the Prophets, or Mohammed was not the Seal of the Prophets. And so on and so forth. The notion that it is true for one group but false for others that such events occurred seems, on the face of it, unintelligible. How could things be so? On the face of it, relativism that is limited to a putative supreme religious reality seems just as problematic.

Second, if the interpretation of reality (either in general or with respect to some particular area of inquiry) that is offered by each tradition is to be something more than a fabrication of the tradition in question, there must be an external reality that serves as a constraint on the range and character of the interpretations that are offered of it. But if reality serves as a constraint in this fashion, there must be a way that it is in itself.[4] There must be a way that it is in itself, even if we are unable to say much about it—other than, say, that it thwarts such and such a description and encourages or lends itself to such and such other descriptions. If there is a way that it is in itself, we would need a compelling argument to the effect that we can say little or nothing about it as it is in itself. If there is a way that reality is in itself, we might provide an account of it that is right, or partly right, by accident, if nothing else.

Hick's Pluralism

John Hick's work is normally taken to exemplify convergentist pluralism, and that is how I will read him here.[5] Hick does not mean to include all religious traditions in the scope of his claims, only those that facilitate salvation, which Hick understands to consist in a transformation of people from self-centeredness to Real-centeredness, where this includes altruism. In addition, he does not advocate unlimited across-the-board pluralism, which would say that *all of the claims* of the traditions within the scope of his hypothesis are correct. So his pluralism about truth is, in my terms, both restricted in scope and limited. Hence even if his pluralistic hypothesis is a success, it could be that it provides a single exception to what is otherwise large-scale mutual exclusivity among the major traditions. Correspondingly, if it is a failure, that may not reflect negatively on the viability of pluralism with respect to other matters of religious significance. I will use a discussion of Hick's well-known proposal as a way to introduce some pluralistic possibilities, as well as some of the difficulties they face. I do so partly because Hick is one of the religious pioneers of our time and is so much more engaging than his various

4. For an airing of some relevant issues, see Paul O'Grady, *Relativism* (Chesham, England: Acumen, 2002), especially chapter 3, "Ontological Relativism."

5. For some discussion of a nonconvergentist reading of Hick, see George Mavrodes, "Polytheism," in Quinn and Meeker, eds., *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*.

detractors: he can be read for inspiration and vision, whereas his critics can be read for distinctions and sometimes for new ways to dig in one's religious heels.

Hick's pluralism consists in an endorsement of pluralism concerning the truth about the supreme religious reality:

> PT5 With respect to its claims about the supreme religious reality, our religion does extremely well in terms of truth; other traditions do equally well, and no tradition does better than we do (in this respect).

Christians understand themselves to worship God; Muslims understand themselves to worship Allah; some Hindus understand themselves to worship Krishna or Vishnu; other Hindus and some mystics believe there to be a nonpersonal religious reality. On Hick's view, the members of these and other religions are, unbeknownst to themselves, actually dealing with, and after a fashion describing correctly, the *same* religious reality or "religious ultimate" ("the Real"), variously construed. And some people experience the Real as personal, whereas others experience it as nonpersonal.

This proposal has the pleasing feature that it attempts to take seriously religious experience of many varieties. In this regard, the theory is preferable to most other religious perspectives on religion. However, Hick's ideas can be, and have been, understood in more than one way, even if we restrict ourselves to convergentist readings. I will start with what is both the natural and the usual reading. I shall call it "noumenal pluralism."

Noumenal Pluralism

Consider the following passages from Hick's already classic work, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992):

> We . . . have to distinguish between the Real [as it is in itself] and the Real as variously experienced-and-thought by different human communities. (236)

> [The] noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of gods and absolutes which the phenomenology of religion reports. And these [gods and absolutes] . . . are not illusory but are empirically, that is experientially, real as authentic manifestations of the Real. (242)

> [One] can say that the real is experienced by human beings, but experienced in a manner analogous to that in which, according to Kant, we

> experience the world: namely by informational input from external reality being interpreted by the mind in terms of its own categorical scheme and thus coming to consciousness as a meaningful phenomenal experience. All that we are entitled to say about the noumenal source of this information is that it is the reality whose influence produces, in collaboration with the human mind, the phenomenal world of our experience. (243)

> [We] cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its *personae* or *impersonae*. Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or nonpurposive. None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienced ground of that realm. . . . We cannot even speak of this as a thing or entity. (246)

So there is an unknowable, inaccessible Real, and we can say nothing about it as it is in itself. At least, we can say nothing substantive about it. We can say only trivial, relatively uninformative things about it, such as that we can say nothing substantive about it. The situation is not just that we cannot be sure that what we are saying about it is accurate. Rather, our (substantive) concepts and terms do not even apply to it as it is in itself. They apply to it only when it is construed in the various ways in which it is construed in the various religious traditions. The various construals of it, in turn, are the product of interaction between the Real as it is in itself and the various relevant traditions. There is causal input from these two directions, and the various phenomena of familiar religious worship and practice (Allah, Krishna, Nirvana, and so forth) represent the confluence of these two causal streams. According to this proposal, too, no particular religion or type of religion gets special treatment. For example, Hick rejects the idea that we should attribute to the Real any distinctively theistic attributes.

Some Objections to Noumenal Pluralism

I will start with a couple of well-known objections. First, to say that the Real as it is in itself is involved in the production of the various conceptions of it that are to be found in the various relevant religious communities is to say that the Real as it is in itself has a causal role. If it has a causal role, then it is not true that none of our substantive concepts apply to it. The concept of causality, at any rate, applies to it. Hick also proposes that the Real as it is in itself is infinite, exists, and is a single reality. (He actually says both that the Real an sich is a single reality and that concepts such as "one" and "many" do not apply to it.

Obviously, he needs to decide which way to go with respect to this matter.) So even within his own theory, in the terms in which he presents it, he appears to say that some substantive concepts apply to the Real as it is in itself. To be sure, the distinction between substantive and logical properties is not completely clear. But rather than get immersed in a discussion of this distinction, I would just note that the concepts mentioned (causality, infinity, existence, and uniqueness) do appear to convey some information. However, this first objection is not a terribly serious one. Really it calls for more clarification.

A second familiar objection is that Hick's proposal, as construed here, is religiously inadequate. It says that none of the properties or qualities that are attributed to the various relevant realities that are posited by the different traditions may be attributed to the Real as it is in itself. Accordingly, the Real as it is in itself is neither good nor benevolent nor just, for example. Nor does it act in history; nor is it the source of any particular revelation. There is a high price to be paid for going this way if we look at matters from many conventional religious perspectives.

Let's look at the issue from a theistic perspective. Believers in God typically say that God has a certain nature and that God acts in history—responding to prayers, forgiving, rewarding, punishing, and so on. Hence they believe that even if there were no human beings, there would still exist a being with the traditional theistic attributes—a being that is good, benevolent, just, omnipotent, omniscient, and much more besides. But on the noumenal reading of Hick's view, this is not the case. On the contrary, in the absence of all human communities, the Real—as it would then be—would not have the nature attributed to God by theists. It would have none of the standard theistic properties. Indeed, if all of the members of the theistic traditions were to die off, the religious reality that they believe to exist, being a phenomenon that depends for its existence on their thinking as they do, would die off with them—at least insofar as it is the sort of thing that they believe to exist. What there is independent of all human communities, and what would remain in the absence of those communities, is something about which, as it is in itself, nothing substantive may be said.[6] (Whatever it is that theists, for example, believe to exist might be thought to continue to exist in the sense that if the relevant group were to reappear, the reality that they believe to exist would once again be believed to exist, so that the

6. Within Hick's theory, the Real as it is in itself supposedly has a causal role, being one of the sources of the various conceptions of what is religiously ultimate. However, it is an odd candidate for this role. By this, I mean just that there is nothing about it, as it is in itself, that suggests that it as much as has anything to do with religion, as distinct from physics or chess or economics, for example. For example, there is nothing about it as it is in itself that would make it a suitable object of distinctively religious attitudes, such as reverence and awe.

Real always has a *potential* to be conceived of in the relevant way. But this is a pale shadow of what is believed by the relevant traditions to be the case.)

Suppose that a theist believes that she experiences God guiding her to devote her life to fighting for some cause. According to the noumenal view, the content of her experience is to be understood primarily as a product of her, or at least of her religious culture. There is an external *source* of the information, but all that can be said about this source is just that it *is* a source. The Real as it is in itself does not tell her anything because it is not, in itself, a personal being, and only a personal being could tell anyone anything or, for that matter, be concerned about what she might or might not do. So theists pay a high price for opting for noumenal pluralism.[7] Of course, some may be willing to pay this price.[8]

Here is a third objection. If none of our concepts apply to the Real *an sich*, what is the justification for assuming that only a salvifically effective tradition should be regarded as having a conception of the Real that is a product of genuine interaction between the Real and a faith community? Perhaps some conceptions of the Real that are espoused by traditions that are salvifically effective, or at least show all outward signs of being so, are nothing but human creations. (The proposals of those who argue that beliefs about God and the like are nothing but human projections come to mind as a way to account for how such conceptions might be formed—at least in the case in which the values that are encapsulated in the deity are endorsed in the relevant community.) On the other hand, perhaps some conceptions that have a place in traditions that are not salvifically effective are products of genuine interaction between the Real and faith communities: their failure to be salvifically effective might be accounted for by, say, the recalcitrance or confusion of the members of the relevant community. It is hard to see why one should go one way rather than another on these matters once one assumes the virtually complete unknowability of the Real as it is in itself.

7. Muhammad Legenhausen makes essentially the same point as follows: "No matter how miserably we fail, Muslims aspire to build a society founded on the example of the Prophet's just governance in accordance with Divine Law. This aspiration can not be sustained if the *shari'ah* is nothing more than a byproduct of early medieval Arabia's cultural response to its Prophet's confrontation with Reality" ("A Muslim Non-Reductive Religious Pluralism," in Roger Boase, ed., *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, 63).

8. Hardly a conventional theist, Hick is himself certainly willing to pay this price. However, he has his own internal reasons to be sensitive to the issue of religious adequacy. He generally attempts to show that his thinking is consonant in important respects with the religious traditions he proposes to interpret. At least, this aspiration is a strand in his thinking, as is evinced by the detailed case he makes for there being a recognition within many major traditions of the distinction between the Real as it is in itself and the Real as it appears to us (*An Interpretation of Religion*, 236f.). And he therefore sees it as a point in favor of a hypothesis of the sort that he proposes to offer that it conforms to what the religious traditions have to say about relevant matters.

Another Objection: Goodness and the Real

According to Hick, the most important indicator that a religious tradition is not just a creation of the human imagination but is instead in part a product of input from the Real is that it facilitates the transformation of people from self-centeredness to Real-centeredness, where this includes altruism.[9] Might this tell us something about the Real as it is in itself? I propose that the hypothesis of a Real that is, as it is in itself, disposed to altruism is more reasonable—within the terms that Hick himself stipulates—than the hypothesis of a Real that is such that none of our substantive concepts, including such concepts as altruism, apply to it as it is in itself. This objection is related to all of the objections considered in the last section. First, this new objection has to do with whether a substantive property may be attributed to the Real as it is in itself. Second, it has a bearing on the religious adequacy of the Real as it is in itself. Third, it has a bearing on why it might be that only traditions that are salvifically effective involve input from the Real as it is in itself.

Here is a simple starting point for reflection. If it were part of a hypothesis that traditions that are in part a product of the Real as it is in itself all had members that were, say, especially aggressive or especially interested in fly-fishing, it would seem reasonable to assume as part of that hypothesis that the Real as it is in itself is well disposed to aggression or fly-fishing, as the case may be.

Presumably, the putative conceptions of the Real that are to be found in the relevant traditions have some source or other. There seem to be only two possible sources: on the one hand, the Real as it is in itself and, on the other hand, humans and their cultures. On the face of it, it seems reasonable to try to explain what the traditions that are assumed to be in touch with the Real and to be influenced by it have in common by appeal to something about the Real as it is in itself. In turn, it seems reasonable to try to explain the differences among those traditions by appeal to something that is distinctive of each tradition.

The hypothesis of a morally positive Real—henceforth GR, short for "good Real"—would also enable Hick to respond to the following criticism from Paul Eddy ("Religious Pluralism and the Divine: Another Look at John Hick's Neo-Kantian Proposal," in Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker, eds., *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, 126–138). Eddy says that

9. Much of the material in this section is drawn from my paper "The Goodness of the Real," *Sophia* 42(2): 172–178, 2003. William Wainwright also argues for the same conclusion in "Competing Religious Claims," chapter 10, in William E. Mann, ed., *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 220–241. See, in particular, 226–228.

within Hick's theory there is no reason to postulate the Real because everything that needs to be explained by that theory can be explained without it (135). Eddy's view is that, contrary to what Hick says, each conception of the Real is best understood within his theory as entirely a product of the community that believes in it—so that within Hick's theory, the Real as it is in itself is superfluous. However, if the presence of an external reality that is favorably disposed to altruism, or compassion or goodness, is appealed to in order to account for the presence in the various relevant religious traditions of people who manifest these qualities, then the Real as it is in itself has an important explanatory role.

In addition, the idea of GR is more adequate religiously than is Hick's hypothesis, capturing more of what is important to the religious traditions. As already noted, Hick's Real an sich, being something to which none of our concepts apply, is not a suitable object of distinctively religious attitudes, such as reverence and awe. As also noted, Hick sees it as a point in favor of a hypothesis of the sort that he proposes that it conforms to what the religious traditions have to say about relevant matters. Hence if, as I aver, GR captures more of what is religiously significant to the traditions, Hick should recognize this as an important point in its favor.

Moreover, if the reality behind the various deities and states (God, Shiva, Nirvana . . .) were a morally positive reality rather than one to which no moral concepts apply, the universe would be a better place on that account. If the Real an sich is disposed toward altruism, for example, altruism has in that case a deeper grip on reality than it otherwise would have. It does not occur only at the level of appearance. Whether at the deepest level reality is something that is morally positive (rather than morally neutral or, worse, morally unsatisfactory) is one of the most significant questions. The proposed modification makes it possible to answer this question in a way that is more optimistic in its appraisal of reality than is Hick's hypothesis. (How much weight should be put on this consideration is, to be sure, debatable.)

With so much to be said for GR, why does Hick prefer his hypothesis, according to which nothing substantive may be said about the Real as it is in itself? One strand in his reasoning seems to appeal to the infinity of the Real. But, as Eddy rightly says, infinity does not entail ineffability (129f.; also his *John Hick's Pluralist Philosophy of Religion* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 168 ff.). The infinity of the Real is more plausibly thought of as a barrier to human beings knowing the Real completely than it is to human beings knowing the Real at all. Also, infinity is an incomplete idea. To say that something is infinite is like saying that something is "extremely"—without saying extremely *what*. It is not possible for something to be infinite without being infinite in one or more respects—such as physical size, knowledge, power, evil, number of qualities, or, for that matter, goodness. Rather than infinity ruling out a

quality such as goodness, goodness is just one of many ways in which infinity might be given content.[10]

Actually, to an extent that I am unclear about, the proposal under discussion clarifies what Hick is already committed to, as distinct from serving as an objection to what he is proposing. He thinks that there is something about the Real an sich that makes it conducive to the desired transformation of individuals, where this includes becoming more altruistic. The Real, in his view, is the "more ultimate ground of all salvific transformation"—more ultimate, that is, than the various phenomenal religious realities (John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," in Quinn and Meeker, *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, 59). And he thinks that the Real, as it is in itself, contributes to the conceptions of the Real that are morally transformative or that, at any rate, are central to traditions that are morally transformative.

We might think in terms of some feature of the Real as it is in itself that moves communities and individuals that have contact with it to be favorably disposed to goodness and yet think of this as a feature about which we know nothing—other than that it has this effect. In that case, we would be unable to say anything at all about what characteristics it has that enable it to be conducive to this moral transformation. On this scenario, the moral transformation that results from contact with the Real might actually be an accidental by-product of features of the Real as it is in itself that have no connection at all with moral transformation. The preferable approach, I think, is to think of the Real as having this effect because it is itself somehow on the side of altruism, even if we have only a vague idea of what this actually amounts to. It is just that in that case we are not wholly in the dark about it.

If we are thinking of this move as one we are making while otherwise being as faithful to Hick as possible, we should also assume that the good-producing character that is attributed to the Real an sich is not to be described in such a way that one or more of the major traditions is favored over the others. A quality such as compassion will not be imputed to the Real, for being compassionate requires having a mind and understanding situations. And to attribute these—or wants or desires, for example—is to personify the Real and hence would involve favoring certain traditions over others. In particular, it would involve favoring the theistic traditions.

But it might be objected, doesn't the attribution of goodness to the Real an sich face much the same difficulty? Doesn't taking this step have the result that some accounts of what is most important religiously are in a certain respect

10. Indeed, Hick makes the point well himself: "God is defined in classical theism largely in terms of omni-attributes. These include infinite goodness and love, infinite wisdom and justice, omnipotence, omniscience and eternity. It seems best to regard infinity, not as a separate characteristic, but as a second-order qualifier of the first-order characteristics" (*An Interpretation of Religion*, 258).

more accurate than those provided by other traditions?[11] Thus theism will be closer to the truth than will be Mahayana Buddhism, which says that reality is emptiness, for theism says that the supreme religious reality is good, whereas the Mahayana school says that reality itself "is devoid of all human distinctions, of all individual perspectives, of all self-centred evaluations. . . . [It] is non-discriminated . . . ineffable, beyond the scope of human concepts" (Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 289, 291). One thought here, though, is that if there is anything to this objection, it is merely the mirror-image of a problem that is already faced by Hick's proposal, in the form in which he presents it. Even though Hick denies this, his own approach has it that some traditions come closer to the truth than do others. His entirely ineffable Real more closely resembles emptiness that is ineffable and beyond the scope of human concepts than it resembles a loving or a compassionate God.

More important, the GR proposal does not privilege any particular tradition in that Hick says that all of the major traditions are equally salvifically effective. What we are adding, just because of this claim of equal salvific effectiveness, is the idea that there is a conduciveness to salvific transformation in the Real—even if we do not understand how it works. He has it that the Real has morally positive effects without there being anything morally positive about it. What GR is adding is that the Real as it is in itself is somehow on the side of what is morally positive.

As far as I can tell, Hick has no compelling reason to prefer his Real over GR, and there are quite a few reasons to prefer GR. Hick sometimes says that the objects of worship or reverence whose existence believers are committed to are *manifestations* of the Real. What I am proposing is that they be understood to make manifest a dimension of it, without which element talk of manifestation is empty. *Manifestation* implies causal input but it implies more than that. To make something manifest is to display, disclose, or exhibit something about it. How could something we can become acquainted with, even to some extent, be a manifestation of something about which nothing can be said, something to which none of our substantive terms apply?

Another hypothesis, distinct both from what Hick proposes and what I have proposed in this section, is that there is a Real that we know so little about that we are unable to say whether it is morally positive. This more agnostic pluralistic hypothesis, too, seems at least as plausible as Hick's.

To conclude, Hick's pluralistic hypothesis, understood in the noumenal way, faces some difficulties. Yet we can imagine it being clarified, somehow or other, in light of the first objection introduced in the last section. And we can imagine it being modified in the way I have suggested in this section, with the result that the sting is somewhat taken out of the second and third objections in the last

11. Eddy discusses related issues at *John Hick's Pluralist Philosophy of Religion*, 182.

section. So the difficulties mentioned may be surmountable.[12] Perhaps an appropriately modified version of the noumenal view might work after all. I do not presume to have settled the matter.

Elephants, Ducks, Rabbits, and More Besides

There is, however, a quite different convergentist reading of Hick. To get a handle on what this amounts to, let's start with the famous story of the blind men and the elephant:

> An elephant was brought to a group of blind men who had never encountered such an animal before. One felt a leg and reported that an elephant is a great living pillar. Another felt the trunk and reported that an elephant is a great snake. Another felt a tusk and reported that an elephant is like a sharp plowshare. And so on.

In this context, it is also helpful to consider various ambiguous drawings such as the drawing of a duck-rabbit that can be seen either as a drawing of a duck or as a drawing of a rabbit. Drawings that permit more than one figure-ground organization, such as the vase-faces drawings, are equally relevant.

Consider the following remarks from Hick that at least hint at something other than the noumenal theory.

> In so far as the heavenly Father and Brahman are two authentic manifestations of the Real, the love and justice of the one and the consciousness of the other are *aspects of the Real as manifested within human experience*. As the noumenal ground of these and other modes of experience, and yet transcending all of them, the Real is *so rich in content* that it can only be finitely experienced in the various partial and inadequate ways which the history of religions describes. (*An Interpretation of Religion*, 247, my emphasis)

> [*The] Eternal may be*—and has in fact been experienced as being—*personal*... without this genuinely personal character exhausting its infinity, so that *the same Reality may also be*—and has in fact been experienced as being—... [*impersonal*] ... [in] a finite entity, personality and

12. The difficulties mentioned are among the most important objections to Hick's theory, as understood here, that have been presented. For some additional objections to Hick's hypothesis, see Paul Rhodes Eddy, *John Hick's Pluralist Philosophy of Religion*, chapter 5 and *passim*. Also see Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1995), and Muhammad Legenhausen, "A Muslim Non-Reductive Religious Pluralism," 63 and *passim*.

> impersonality are mutually incompatible. But *why should they be incompatible in the Infinite*? (*Death and Eternal Life* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980], 32, my emphasis)

> Speaking very tentatively, I think it is possible that the sense of the divine as non-personal may indeed reflect *an aspect of the same infinite reality* that is encountered as personal in theistic religious experience. (*God and the Universe of Faiths* [London: Macmillan, 1973], 144, my emphasis)

In these passages, we may have the idea of a complex entity that can correctly be described in both personal and impersonal terms. That is, it actually possesses personal and impersonal aspects. And it is knowable to us, at least in part, even as it is in itself, with different traditions being acquainted with different aspects. The first of these passages, in particular, does not exactly interpret itself. The last sentence of this passage seems to indicate that the Real, as it is in itself, may be experienced in numerous partial and inadequate ways because of its rich complexity. As for the rest of this passage, if love and justice are "manifestations" of the Real, then something is made manifest about it. As mentioned earlier, this seems to indicate that some information about it as it is in itself is being conveyed. And maybe the remark that "the love and justice of the one and the consciousness of the other are aspects of the Real as manifested within human experience" entails or suggests that love, justice, and consciousness are aspects of the Real as it is in itself, aspects that are then manifested in human experience. Perhaps, on the other hand, this particular remark is better interpreted as saying that love, justice, and consciousness are only aspects of the-Real-as-manifested-within-human-experience—which would be more suggestive of the noumenal nothing-substantive-may-be-said-about-it-as-it-is-in-itself view. And mention of the Real as the noumenal ground of the manifestations perhaps rules out any information about how it is in itself being conveyed. The situation is a bit confusing. Still, the other two passages quoted suffice to make it clear that the proposal that there is a Real that, in itself, incorporates both personal and impersonal dimensions is indeed a strand in Hick's thought, or at least that it has been a strand in his thought.

Actually, the fact that Hick invokes the parts of the elephant motif by way of expositing his views also indicates that this more-than-one-aspect theme is a strand in his thinking. For this motif is suggestive of something that is quite different from the noumenal view. It suggests a reality that, as it is in itself, has some aspects that we can get some grasp of, aspects whose coexistence is surprising—rather than a reality about which, as it is in itself, nothing may be said. Indeed, in deploying the elephant motif, Hick himself remarks that the descriptions of the blind men "were all true, but each referring only to one aspect of the

total reality and all expressed in very imperfect analogies" (*God and the Universe of Faiths*, 140).

What we have here is, to be sure, at most a relatively minor strand in Hick's work. Perhaps it is even best understood as a strand that surfaced in the course of his development but that was later eclipsed. However, the more important question is whether it is a plausible view. So ignoring its pedigree, let's consider its merits.

The Many Natures Proposal

Let's consider the proposal that there might be a reality that possesses both a personal and a nonpersonal nature.[13] The personal nature would provide the basis for a description of a being with mental states and processes and with whom interaction is possible. On the other hand, the nonpersonal nature can be described without making reference to the personal. Here I have in mind references to *pure consciousness* or *bliss* or the Absolute or Brahman.

The suggestion that something could have both of these natures may seem far-fetched. But consider the following simple point. A description of a human being can be given in personal terms. Thus each of us may be described as a being who acts, cares, knows, perceives, desires, and so forth. Here there is no reference to anything nonpersonal. But another description of each of us can be given in nonpersonal terms, for example, by providing a description of the brain and its goings-on, where this might include mention of electrical impulses and chemical changes. Here we have a description that makes no reference to the personal.

Talk of something having more than one nature nicely captures the idea that more than one description with an appearance of completeness can be given. It also gives expression to the idea that something has one set of properties, on account of which it may properly be included in one category of entities, and another set of properties, on account of which it may properly be included in another category. That something has two natures may be something that has to be discovered. Prior to that discovery, it may seem that if one way of describing it is correct, the other must be incorrect.

In the case of each nature, a detailed description can be offered such that if you knew only that way of describing the object in question, you might think that you had a complete description. And your first reaction, if you were familiar with one description and then encountered the other, might be to deny that the other description either pertains to, or even could pertain to, the reality to which

13. Some of the material in this section is drawn from my article "Could God Have More Than One Nature?" *Faith and Philosophy* 5(4): 378–398, 1988.

you take the familiar description to refer. We do not have here a way to reconcile genuinely incompatible descriptions—only descriptions that appear to be incompatible but that actually turn out to be compatible.

Let's call this the *many natures proposal*. One might equally well call it the *complex nature proposal*, since it is the complexity of the reality in question that explains how apparently incompatible descriptions can all be true. A proposal of this sort can be limited in scope. For example, like Hick's proposal, it might be limited to traditions that are morally transformative. Or it might be limited in scope in any number of other possible ways. On the other hand it might not be limited in scope at all and might instead be thought to have application to all traditions.

If there is more than one way to describe something, some groups may think that the description they are most accustomed to or most familiar with is deepest, most illuminating, or most important. Of course, theists and nontheists might both make this claim in the case of a Real that has both personal and nonpersonal aspects. The theist may point out that people can interact with this being and communicate with it and may contend that nothing about it could be more important and more wonderful than such interaction being possible. The nontheist, by contrast, may point out that she can enter into, absorb herself in, the nonpersonal reality by engaging in certain meditative practices and may think the personal conception to be lower, inferior, presumptuously anthropomorphic, a concession to human limitations, or the like. Whether one rather than the other nature is more important, all things considered, is another matter entirely, if indeed it makes sense to think in such terms. Still, each side will claim that its insights are the most important ones. Which description appears most important (or most illuminating and so on) may be a function of one's interests or priorities. After all, what sort of description of *us* you think is most important probably will depend on what sort of project you are engaged in—whether, for example, you are working in the neurosciences, psychology, or theology, writing a biography, or offering a folk-psychological description.

I will not pursue here the question of whether, all things considered, the many natures proposal is plausible, or how you would go about determining whether this is so. Nor will I probe either the question of whether particular nonpersonal accounts and particular personal accounts can be accommodated in this fashion or the related question of the range of apparently incompatible properties that might be accommodated in this way. Yet we can see that a theory of this sort is, at any rate, more satisfying from a religious point of view than the noumenal approach. It can accommodate the possibility of learning more about a reality about which we already know a lot rather than thinking, as the noumenal approach proposes, in terms of a reality about which, as it is in itself, we can know nothing or next to nothing.

Why Elephants Should Not Be Confused with Ducks and Rabbits

Both of these motifs, when deployed in this context, assume that there can be descriptions of the Real that provide some information about it as it is in itself. So in this respect, both are suggestive of the many natures approach, and both differ greatly from the noumenal view.

However, these motifs differ in important respects from each other, and thinking about the ways in which they do so opens up additional possible forms of pluralism. Once you see that a figure is a duck-rabbit, you can see both of its aspects, even if it may be difficult to focus fully on both at once. What we have is not merely a drawing that can be seen as that of a duck and as that of a rabbit. It is, in addition, a drawing that lends itself to being seen either as a drawing of a duck or as a drawing of a rabbit. This is because it actually has a drawing-of-a-duck aspect and a drawing-of-a-rabbit aspect. It can correctly be seen in both ways.

On the other hand, everything the blind men say about the elephant is, strictly speaking, false. The elephant is neither a great living pillar nor a great snake nor a sharp plowshare. Nor does it satisfy any of the other descriptions offered by the blind men. Yet we understand why the blind men say what they say. For there is a part that is somewhat like a living pillar, a part that is somewhat like a great snake, and so on. In each case, there is something about the reality that is being encountered that has the result that it is understandable that each describes it as he does. In each case, there is a part such that we can understand how someone might mistakenly describe it in each of the ways in which the various blind men, responding to "their" part and given the limitation imposed by their blindness, endeavor to describe the elephant. What each blind man says, therefore, while it certainly involves considerable misunderstanding, is not an entirely useless guide to its actual character. The descriptions of each are understandable distortions that, while misleading, incomplete, and inaccurate, convey some information and are not entirely misleading. Thus if there is one who says he is feeling a rope, he can be assumed to be feeling something that shares some of the qualities of a rope—such as being bendable and graspable. And if what is felt by one of the blind men resembles a great living pillar, with the result that he so describes it, it resembles a great living pillar in virtue of possessing certain relevant qualities. So an elephant analysis has to operate within constraints that are provided by the nature of the reality in question.

While it is not possible for all of the descriptions of the seven blind men to be true, what can be true is that they are all describing a complex entity with parts such that one can understand what each is responding to when he describes the elephant as he does. Moreover, when taken as statements about what a particular

part of the elephant resembles, their descriptions are compatible. Something can feel like a great living pillar and feel like a great snake if it has different parts, at least one of which feels like a great living pillar and at least one of which feels like a great snake.

Actually, when we read the elephant story, we assume that the blind men do the best they can, using familiar terms and concepts to respond to something unfamiliar. We automatically take it for granted, for example, that the blind men are not trying to deceive us or play a joke on us or just randomly or carelessly saying the first thing that comes into their heads. This assumption that they are trying as best they can to describe what they are encountering is linked to the notion that they manage to convey some information about it.

To be sure, these motifs have a lot in common. This includes the element of parity that is characteristic of pluralism. Thus I think we take it for granted that the understandable distortions of the blind men are, in some loose sense, equally distortive of what they are encountering. Likewise, the duck-rabbit is in some loose sense equally a duck and a rabbit. There is also parity in the following important respect. None of the blind men realizes that what he is dealing with overall is an elephant. So not only does each have a distorted interpretation of "his" part, in addition all of them are missing the big picture entirely, and equally so. Likewise, those who focus exclusively on one aspect of the duck-rabbit are missing the big picture and, again, doing so to an equal extent.

Yet, as we have seen, there are two pluralistic proposals here and not just one. The duck-rabbit analysis and the parts of the elephant analysis differ with respect to the accuracy of the relevant descriptions and hence with respect to how much information they convey about the relevant reality. One says that there is a reality that satisfies, albeit counterintuitively and surprisingly, a number of descriptions that to the unschooled appear inconsistent. The other says, in effect, that various competing descriptions are understandable reactions that, while inaccurate, do convey some information about the reality in question. More precisely, the elephant motif is partway along a trajectory that runs from the noumenal view, with its idea of a reality that, as it is in itself, dwells in utter obscurity, to the duck-rabbit view that involves a surprising combination of accessible aspects. There is a range of significantly different pluralistic options here.

Extending Pluralism

I have been probing pluralism as a position concerning competing accounts of what is religiously ultimate. Are there, however, other areas of religious significance to which a pluralistic analysis might be relevant? Could a pluralistic hypothesis be fashioned that pertains to, say, competing conceptions of the

afterlife, competing religious accounts of the origins of the universe, or competing conceptions of human nature, of how salvation is achieved, or of the best route to salvation? If we were to pursue the matter thoroughly, we would need to consider, in the case of each of these issues, all options for a pluralistic hypothesis: the noumenal analysis, according to which there is something that is, in itself, indescribable and inaccessible but that is conceived of by the traditions in different ways; the parts of the elephant version of the many natures proposal and all that it involves; likewise, for the duck-rabbit approach; and various nonconvergent ideas, too.

It could be that a pluralistic analysis that is not viable in one area of religious significance is viable in another. The parts of the elephant approach—which would have it that various descriptions are best seen as partial, incomplete, and only fairly successful, though they do not miss the mark entirely and do manage to convey some information—might, for example, be applied to the conceptions of survival of death that are to be found in the Christian tradition and in the Hindu tradition. Both conceptions, on this analysis, would be thought to be incomplete and misleading but yet not entirely unsuccessful attempts to capture a complex reality. And so on for other areas and topics of religious significance. Moreover, one might consistently be a pluralist in one or more areas of religious significance and something else, perhaps an exclusivist or an inclusivist, in other areas. Once again, there is a range of interesting options to consider.

Pluralism about Salvation

Inclusivism about salvation, we found, was best understood to involve the claim:

IS1 Salvation is available to outsiders.

as well as the claim that, in one respect or another:

IS2 Outsiders are not as well situated with respect to salvation as we are.

Pluralism about salvation certainly should be understood to include IS1. It also says that, contrary to IS2, outsiders *are* as well situated with respect to salvation as we are. So not only is it true that, as IS1 has it, salvation is available to others: it is, in addition, just as available to them as it is to us. Outsiders are at no disadvantage in terms of their prospects for achieving salvation. Drawing on lessons already learned, we should also understand pluralism to include the idea that we are very well situated with respect to salvation. Let's make this explicit as follows:

PS1 Outsiders are as well situated with respect to salvation as we are, and we are very well situated.

Next, consider the idea that our tradition and some or all other traditions are on a par with respect to their capacity to enable people to achieve salvation. To be more specific, and drawing once again on lessons already learned, let's consider this idea:

PS2 Our religion provides a very good means to salvation; other traditions provide an equally good means, and no tradition does better than we do (in this respect).

I will refer to PS2 as *pluralism about the means of salvation*.

There are various metaphors that are deployed in the course of discussions of pluralism that are suggestive of pluralism about the means. These include, for example, the idea of many paths up a mountain or many ways to climb a tree—by a rope, a ladder, by pulling yourself up using your own two hands, and so forth. At least what is suggested in such cases is pluralism about the means if the routes in question are equally good, or roughly equally good, in terms of whatever makes for goodness in a route to salvation. Some routes might be more arduous. Other routes might enjoy a higher rate of success among those who take them. Other routes might lead to a better destination, or a better part of the same destination, and be better for that reason. But on balance, when all relevant factors are taken into account—all of the factors, whatever they may be, that have a bearing on how good a route to salvation is—the relevant routes are taken by the pluralist to be about as good as ours. (And ours is taken to be very good.) PS2 could be sweeping in its scope, in which case there would be no reason to say "and no tradition does better than we do." If the scope is restricted, however, someone who endorses PS2 can consistently allow that some religious traditions (namely, those that are outside the scope of the relevant pluralistic proposal) provide routes to salvation that are not as good as ours or even provide no route to salvation at all.

PS2 does not say (or imply or suggest) anything about whether there is, so to speak, a single salvific destination as distinct from many such destinations. If there are many destinations, however, pluralism would require that those salvations that are within the scope of the pluralistic hypothesis are equally good. (We could refer to the view that this is so as *pluralism about salvific destinations*.) If someone thinks that there are better and worse destinations, and that his group does best in terms of destinations, he is an inclusivist with respect to salvation—or at any rate he is an inclusivist concerning salvific destinations in the case of those traditions that do not do as well as his tradition.

PS1 is about individuals: it makes no mention of whether they belong to any religious tradition. PS2, on the other hand, is about religious traditions. Perhaps

pluralism about salvation should be understood as the combination of PS1 and PS2. Another option, though, would be to understand pluralism about salvation to consist in the combination of PS2 and

> PS3 Members of the traditions that fall within the scope of PS2 are as well situated with respect to salvation as we are, and we are very well situated.

This differs from PS1 in that the relevant others are now limited to members of the traditions to which pluralism about the means of salvation (PS2) extends. So there are a number of options.[14]

PS2 has it that there are a number of equally good routes to salvation. Could there also be single-route salvific pluralism? If the route in question is associated with a particular tradition, then the members of that tradition are better off in the sense that it is their tradition that makes salvation possible, and what we have is a form of inclusivism, perhaps something along the lines of piggyback inclusivism. But what if it is a route that is not associated with a particular tradition? This may seem to be a peculiar notion to consider—the idea that there would be, in effect, an unknown route—a route that is no one's route, that no one can claim ownership of, but in virtue of whose availability many groups are equally well situated with respect to salvation. Yet this possibility should not be dismissed too quickly. For one thing, those who endorse piggyback inclusivism with retroactive application to outsiders who lived prior to the historical development of the favored tradition, perhaps to those who responded as best they could to the light then available to them, are already part of the way to thinking along these lines. They are committed to there having been an unknown route in the sense of a route that was available, and that was being availed of, while unknown to everyone who then benefited from it. Of course, that route, they believe, is now known. But a route might be unknown in a deeper sense, one that seems very pluralistic. For example, a noumenal pluralist analysis might be extended to this issue—so that there is a deep truth about the actual route to salvation (the Route, as distinct from the Real). This would be a route that is pointed to in various inadequate ways by the various traditions, none of which manages to describe it. Or there might

14. Additional variations are available for the following reason. Both PS1 and PS3 have to do with outsiders' prospects for achieving salvation. In this case, too, there is room for a version that focuses on the success rate. The relevant counterpart to PS1 in that case would be along these lines: "outsiders fare as well as we fare in terms of actually achieving salvation, and we fare very well." Likewise, in the case of PS2, too, there is room for a success-oriented variation that would have it that the success rates associated with the routes to salvation that are within the scope of the hypothesis would be equally, and very, high.

be a number of attempts to describe it, each of which captures something about it, however partially and misleadingly. And so on. So there may be room here for pluralism about salvation that involves single-route pluralism concerning the means. Hence I am inclined to think of the combination of PS1 and PS2 as a very important case of pluralism about salvation and perhaps the definitive case—but there may be others.

Finally, as was the case with pluralism about truth, the pluralist about salvation also wears two hats. In asserting PS2, he is speaking as a member of a tradition, a tradition that is being said to be on a par with other traditions in an important respect. Yet such a person is advocating pluralism with respect to a number of traditions whose members would themselves presumably not endorse pluralism. Wearing this hat, the pluralist feels that she understands the situation of those traditions that fall within the scope of her hypothesis, and their members, better than they understand themselves.

By way of a reminder that we have not been engaged in idle speculation but rather in reflection that has a great deal of practical application, I will look briefly at a couple of examples. These certainly involve the deployment of pluralistic themes, but they also serve as reminders of the interesting ways in which diverse themes can be intertwined in practice. Consider, first, these remarks from Wilfred Cantwell Smith:

> [In] so far as he or she has been saved, the Muslim has been saved by Islamic faith (faith of an Islamic form, through Islamic patterns; faith mediated by an Islamic context); the Buddhist by Buddhist faith; the Jew by Jewish. . . . [The] religious history of the world is the record of God's loving, creative, inspiring dealings with recalcitrant and sinful but not unresponsive men and women. Christians He has saved through Christ's death and resurrection, through membership in the Church, through the sacraments, through the myths and rituals and the art and music and the theology and the vicissitudinal history of the Christian Church. Buddhists He has saved through the teachings of the Buddha; through the imaginative memory of His person; through the scriptures, and the temples, and perhaps especially those superbly powerful and serene statues of the Buddha-image; and through the addenda to the ever-growing Buddhist process that innovative men and women have introduced in various parts of the world. Jews He has saved through that Torah that Christians have made a point of misunderstanding, and through the changing complex of Judaic minutiae, and through a Testament that for them (and for Him, in His relation to them) is not Old. Hindus He has saved, inspired, encouraged, made creative, through the poetry of the Gita and also through forms and doctrines and structures that many Christians find odd, but that God has found effective.

> (*Towards a New Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981], 168, 171–172)

Is this an endorsement of pluralism about salvation? There is no explicit statement to the effect that the relevant traditions provide equally good means to salvation, but my guess is that Smith understands this to be the case and, indeed, takes it to be the case, too, that they all provide excellent means to salvation and that no tradition does any better in this regard. You also get the strong impression that he thinks that members of the relevant traditions are all equally well situated with respect to salvation, at least in the sense that they are likely to achieve salvation. So we are well on the way to endorsing both PS2 and PS3. On the other hand, all of this seems to be endorsed within a theistic framework. Theism, however exactly it is to be construed, provides the explanation of how it is that the relevant traditions provide equally good means to salvation. Smith seems to be saying, therefore, that God has arranged things so that there will be all of these routes that satisfy those descriptions. So we seem to have here a case of the derivative powers approach. Whatever conception of God is relevant here, those who believe in God are therefore better off in the important respect that it is their story that is the correct one. And nontheists are in an important respect not as well off with respect to salvation as are theists: it is the perspective that is correctly endorsed by the latter group that accounts for the salvific capacity of the traditions of the former groups.

The following case should, I think, be treated in much the same way:

> [Rev. Richard A. Rhem, a minister in the Reformed Church in America] says that he *no longer believes that faith in Jesus is the sole way to salvation*. Jews, Muslims and others, he says, may be *as likely* to enter heaven. . . . [He] calls himself a committed Christian, and extols Jesus to his congregation without reference to other faiths. [But he believes that] "the scope of God's grace extends beyond the Christian community." . . . Mr. Rhem said it had taken him years to come to believe that God grants salvation to non-Christians. . . . To illustrate his thoughts, he invoked the image of a cathedral with stained-glass windows. Inside stand groups of Jews, Christians and Muslims. Each group reads the story of its faith in a particular window. All the windows . . . are illuminated by the light of God. (*New York Times*, August 22, 1996, my emphasis)

Here the scope is limited to the monotheistic traditions. Taking the first and second sentences together, what we have here seems to be the idea that there are various ways to salvation and that those who take them are equally likely to achieve salvation. On the other hand, it is God, as God is understood by

Christians, who has extended the scope of his grace so that these other routes are equally effective.[15]

Concluding Remarks

As with other terms we have encountered, no one has a monopoly on the use of *pluralism*, and the term has been used in a number of ways in addition to those I have mentioned. For example, *pluralism* is frequently used to refer to the very uncontroversial fact of religious diversity.[16] What could cause confusion, of course, is using *pluralism* to refer *both* to this uncontroversial fact and to one or another of the very controversial proposals that we have discussed, such as the combination of PS1 and PS2, without registering that there is a difference.[17]

One can readily encounter additional uses. For example, Harold Netland uses *pluralism* in the following way, which is slightly different from anything we have encountered:

> Pluralism . . . embraces . . . a normative judgment . . . [and] maintains that the major religions are all to be accepted as more or less equally legitimate ways in which culturally and historically conditioned humankind responds to the one divine reality. . . . [Pluralism celebrates] . . . religious diversity as something good, and is deeply suspicious of attempts to privilege any one tradition or perspective as normative for all

15. The last three sentences seem to be about truth rather than salvation. The idea that the same light is seen through many windows, in particular, with its suggestion of the same reality being variously construed, has an air of pluralism concerning truth about it. This is especially so if we assume that each tradition is describing the same light as the others *and* doing a good job of describing it, albeit under the influence of "its" window. On the other hand, if the descriptions proposed by the various relevant traditions are to be accounted for entirely in terms of the constitution of "their" window, so that in effect each has its own object of perception, maybe this is not a pluralistic theory at all. The situation in that case is rather that the many traditions are describing many "windows."

16. For example, Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer use *pluralism* and *diversity* interchangeably in their *Religion in American Life: A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). (See 78 and *passim*.)

17. Alvin Plantinga asks: "But don't the realities of religious pluralism count for anything at all? Is there nothing at all to the claims of the pluralists?" ("Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker, eds., *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, 189). Obviously a pluralist of the sort mentioned in the second sentence is advocating something controversial. He is advocating views for which, it could turn out, there is nothing at all to be said and views for which, it is being suggested, there is at any rate not a great deal to be said. This is someone who is going far beyond recognizing pluralism of the sort mentioned in the first sentence, which seems to be just the fact of religious diversity. Still, mention of the "realities" of pluralism in the first sentence and mention of "the claims of the pluralists" in the second sentence help to clarify what would otherwise be a confusing set of remarks.

> people. . . . [It] is open to the multiplicity of ways of accessing the divine. (Harold A. Netland, "Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth," in David W. Baker, ed., *Biblical Faith and Other Religions: An Evangelical Assessment*, 24)

And Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, an interfaith organization, also advocates "pluralism." Pluralism, as he and his organization construe it, is first and foremost a matter of working energetically and effectively on cooperative projects with others whose religious views are very different, in the process promoting shared values. It also involves discussion of those shared values and an attempt to promote mutual understanding. To advocate pluralism, so understood, is to advocate doing something.[18] Certainly it does not require endorsement of either pluralism about truth or pluralism about salvation, as these have been construed here.

And we can easily imagine numerous additional uses of the term *pluralism*. Just by way of example, it might be used to refer to the combination of the fact of religious diversity with the idea that various traditions are equally valuable in various ways other than those mentioned. They might be equally valuable in terms of, say, the ways of life associated with them, the forms of human flourishing they encourage, or the virtues they endorse. Or it might be used to refer to all of this, combined with the idea that what is valuable about each, or much of what is valuable, is unintelligible or cannot properly be appreciated or cannot even occur (or the like) outside that tradition. Or the focus might be on incommensurability among the various relevant goods, with the result that there is no way to compare their value. Again, to turn in another direction, the emphasis might be on what is valuable about diversity per se or on appreciation of, or promotion of, states of affairs in which religiously diverse groups can coexist and flourish.[19] And then there are numerous possible ways of combining any of the alternatives that have been discussed or mentioned. There is a vast area here to explore.

To revisit once again the issue of scope, it is clear that one might be a pluralist with respect to one or more particular issues, such as truth or salvation, or a pluralist in a more general sense, in the case of some traditions but not others. One might also adopt pluralism with respect to some traditions on some issues and with respect to other traditions on other issues. The possibilities are manifold.

18. Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith* (Boston: Beacon, 2007). Diana Eck has a somewhat similar understanding of pluralism. See, for example, her "Is Our God Listening? Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism," in Roger Boase, ed., *Islam and Global Dialogue*, 21–49.

19. For this use of the term, see, for example, Richard E. Wentz, *The Culture of Religious Pluralism* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998).

Overall, my attitude to pluralism about salvation is that there is nothing incoherent or confused about it. It may, of course, be false in spite of that fact. I do not presume to try to settle the matter. My attitude to pluralism in the area of truth is that it is an area for further exploration. Who knows where reflection in this area may lead? Maybe there will be new pluralistic proposals that will be worth taking seriously, and maybe one of these will be free of difficulties and in the long term come to receive broad support. Really, the more such proposals we have, the better. I certainly have not shown that there is no version of pluralism that is plausible. And I have generally restricted my discussion to convergentist proposals about an ultimate reality and to the best known proposals of this sort. Even in those cases, the difficulties raised do not seem insurmountable.

If we had an intellectually compelling form of pluralism, it would, however, raise many questions. These include questions about the sort of religious practice (prayer, worship, ritual, and so on), if any, the pluralist might engage in. Perhaps people who come to endorse such a view will engage in the practices of their antecedently held tradition, if any, but do so in a more provisional, more tentative, more exploratory way. Or perhaps they would seek out traditions that actually appear to endorse a pluralist perspective—such as Unitarianism or the Baha'i faith. Perhaps they would devote some time and energy to thinking out what new practices need to be developed. But I will not pursue further these interesting possibilities that may actually have a bearing on some of the forms of religion that will flourish in the future.

7

On Religious Ambiguity

Introduction

John Hick has made the following interesting observations about what he characterizes as the religious ambiguity of the universe:

> The universe is religiously ambiguous in that it is possible to interpret it, intellectually and experientially, both religiously and naturalistically. The theistic and anti-theistic arguments are all inconclusive, for the special evidences to which they appeal are also capable of being understood in terms of the contrary world view. Further, the opposing set of evidences cannot be given objectively quantifiable values. (*An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 12)

Hick's view, I think, is that the religious ambiguity to which he alludes is manifested not merely in the fact that it is possible both to interpret the world in a variety of religious ways and to interpret it naturalistically. It is also manifested in the fact that it is possible to do so while adhering to whatever may be the correct standards to adhere to while doing so. Presumably, these would include, and might even consist in, standards of rationality.[1]

It is clear from this passage that Hick understands the ambiguity of the universe to include both intellectual and experiential elements. He means, first, that a sober and careful intellectual assessment of the available evidence would yield the result that the universe is ambiguous. And he means, second, that the universe is open to being experienced in a variety of ways. The idea is in part that a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Confucianist, a Christian, a Muslim, and so forth may

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1. For an account of ambiguity that emphasizes both the rationality of the alternatives and the broad range of responses to religious issues that are rational, see Terence Penelhum, chapter 6, "Faith and Ambiguity," in *Reason and Religious Faith* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995).

each interpret everything he encounters, including his own feelings and all aspects of his experience, in accordance with his religious perspective. And again, each may do so while adhering to whatever may be the correct standards to adhere to while doing so. And the same applies to those who interpret their experience in an entirely naturalistic way.

I consider this experiential ambiguity (if we want a name for it) to include the following additional elements. Many people in many different religious traditions experience the world around them, their own lives, and indeed everything in their experience on which their religious outlook has any bearing through the perspective provided by their tradition. This includes important events in their lives that the religions purport to interpret, such as birth, death, bereavement, coming of age, and the inner struggles that are part of almost every human life. When the religions provide their adherents with a way to understand such phenomena, it does not seem to those adherents that what they experience is discordant with their interpretation of it. On the contrary, they generally feel that what they experience can be comprehended through their religious perspective and its concepts and categories. So their experience normally fits with their expectations in a more or less hand-in-glove fashion, despite whatever anomalies that cause perplexity or elicit reflection there may be. Each of the many competing alternative readings of those phenomena that the religions purport to describe meshes with the experience of a particular religious community, generally providing those who adopt it with a way to interpret what they experience that feels right and that feels natural. Often, their interpretation of their experience feels so right and so natural that they cannot imagine an alternative. Presumably, a religion that did not have a capacity to mesh with the experience of its followers would be discarded. Hence there is a certain inevitability involved in the capacity of religions to fit with the experience of their adherents.

The distinction between intellectual and experiential aspects of ambiguity is hardly strict. For one thing, all of the relevant experiences people enjoy are among the data that an intellectual assessment needs to take account of. Nonetheless, there is a distinction here.

Broadly speaking, I believe that Hick is correct in his contention that our circumstances are religiously ambiguous. One can imagine there having been but one plausible interpretation of those phenomena that the religions propose to interpret, such as human nature, death, suffering, and the origins of the universe. It might have been that there was not a lot of room for different interpretations and that someone who doubted the tenets of, say, the one obviously correct religion would be as foolish as someone who doubted the existence of other people or of the external world. But things are not at all like that.

I want to probe the character of this ambiguity, identifying its salient features. After that, I will have something to say about its implications, especially its implications for how people should respond to outsiders. Much of my

concern is with the ambiguity of *bodies of evidence*, focusing on cases in which a number of hypotheses purport to account for some such body of evidence. A body of evidence is identifiable as a body of evidence if it concerns some situation, matter, or issue, or set of such. This provides the unity that makes for there being a *body* of evidence, as distinct from a random assortment of pieces of evidence. And a situation, matter, or issue is ambiguous just because, and insofar as, the relevant body of evidence is ambiguous. Whatever we say about ambiguity in the case of a body of evidence, situation, or issue will have implications for the ambiguity of many other things, such as sentences, poems, glances, gestures, or advice. But I will forgo further reflection here about what ambiguity might amount to in such cases.

Necessary Conditions of Ambiguity

To begin to explain what the ambiguity under discussion consists in, I will identify some necessary conditions that must be satisfied if a body of evidence is to be ambiguous. One such necessary condition is that there must be a significant or nonnegligible amount of evidence for more than one theory, interpretation, proposal, worldview, or hypothesis. Hence a situation is not ambiguous if it is not clear at all what counts as evidence with respect to it. We might say that a situation of that sort is entirely uncertain. For example, probably it is entirely uncertain whether there will be human life on Earth a billion years from now. A matter such as this is not ambiguous. Rather, it is a matter with respect to which it is hard for us to begin to know how to think.

Another necessary condition is that, given the available evidence, none of the competing hypotheses or relevant proposals is overwhelmingly obvious. For example, it is not possible to prove any one of them to be correct. Nor does the evidence overwhelmingly favor one hypothesis or proposal rather than the others. Thus we would not consider ambiguous a situation in which we find, when all of the evidence is taken into account, that there are, say, 2 units of evidence for one hypothesis and 102 units for the only competing hypothesis, assuming that there are units of some sort by which evidence may be measured. An additional necessary condition is that the evidence does not clearly support one hypothesis over the others, for it might do so clearly without doing so overwhelmingly. This would be so if, say, there were five units of evidence for one hypothesis and eight for another.

Interestingly, the necessary conditions I have just mentioned differ in an important way. They vary with respect to the extent to which, in addition to being necessary, each is close to being sufficient. Let's say that a necessary condition that is also close to being a sufficient condition is a "significant necessary condition." When you show that a property x, whose possession is a significant

necessary condition of having another property y, is possessed by something, you contribute significantly to showing that that thing has y. To show *that* much is to be well on the way to showing that y is possessed. Much that is necessary to showing that y is possessed has been accomplished, and we have just another step or two to take. A particular necessary condition can be significant. As you would expect, though, a combination of necessary conditions is more likely to be so. On the other hand, let's say that a necessary condition that is very far from also being sufficient is a "minimal necessary condition." ("Trivial necessary condition" would also do the trick.)[2]

Among the necessary conditions of ambiguity, there are—on the one hand—conditions that are quite minimal. For example, there being a significant or non-negligible amount of evidence for more than one hypothesis and there not being a proof of any relevant hypothesis are best classified in this way. To learn that these necessary conditions obtain is still to be far from learning that there is ambiguity. On the other hand, if we learn that there is a significant amount of evidence for more than one hypothesis and that the evidence overall does not clearly support one hypothesis rather than the others, we have taken a significant step toward showing that the situation is ambiguous. Here we have a significant necessary condition.

But rather than dally with necessary conditions of ambiguity, whether significant, minimal, or neither, let's take the bull by the horns and try to identify what ambiguity actually is. It will involve all of the necessary conditions I have mentioned. What else might it involve?

Simple Ambiguity

I begin with cases in which the amount of available evidence, while significant, is fairly modest and in which it manifestly supports equally well each of the competing theories or proposals that purport to account for it. A crime has been committed. The only plausible culprits are the butler, the nanny, and the gamekeeper. And there is the same amount of evidence for the guilt of each of these

2. Consider the property of being an Irish male (human being) between the ages of 20 and 80. Call this property "I." Now consider some necessary conditions of having this property. Not being identical with a paperclip is a (very) minimal necessary condition of possessing I. On the other hand, being an Irish male who is 19 or older is a significant necessary condition of possessing I. If we establish that someone satisfies the latter condition, we have thereby acquired important and weighty evidence that someone has property I. (In between, and listed in minimal to close-to-sufficient order, are, say, being a living thing, being human, being Irish, and being an Irish male.) Incidentally, minimal necessary conditions and significant necessary conditions are at two ends of a spectrum, and there are plenty of in-between possibilities, such as a condition that makes a nontrivial contribution to sufficiency but that does not on its own steam take you anywhere close to sufficiency.

parties. Perhaps a footprint near the scene of the crime looks like the gamekeeper's. What seems to be a fragment of the nanny's dress was found nearby. Then there is the dubious past of the butler. For each suspect, we have just a little evidence. And insofar as it points the finger of guilt, it does so to the same extent for each. The evidence for each hypothesis is in equilibrium with the evidence for the others.[3]

Let's say that in cases of this sort, in which there is little available evidence and an equally strong case can be made for a number of different hypotheses, there is "simple ambiguity." Cases of this sort have the following additional characteristic. Just because of the parity in the evidence, there is no intellectual challenge about how to respond. Given the presence of the sort of equilibrium involved in there being as much evidence for each of the competing hypotheses as there is for the others, the reasonable way to respond is just to recognize this to be so, in effect suspending judgment among the alternatives. (Depending on the case, it may, for example, also be reasonable to seek to disambiguate the situation by looking for more evidence.) At least this is so in the case of anyone who is aware of all of the relevant evidence.[4]

The situation of someone who, even in a very simple case of this sort, is aware only of part of the evidence is quite different. Perhaps someone knows only of the dubious past of the butler and has heard nothing of the footprint or the fragment of cloth. Accordingly, he suspects the butler. Being aware of only one part of the available evidence, he opts for one hypothesis to the exclusion of the others. This is understandable, and such a person may not be in any way at fault. (Whether he is at fault will, for example, depend on whether he should have known about the other available pieces of evidence.) For ease of reference, let's refer to the distinction between, on the one hand, being aware of all of the relevant evidence and, on the other hand, being aware of only part of the evidence as the distinction between comprehensive and partial perspectives. One case of a partial perspective is when there is awareness only of the evidence for one of the competing hypotheses. The distinction between comprehensive and partial perspectives has application to ambiguity of different sorts and not only to simple ambiguity.

3. We will assume that for some reason—left to the reader to concoct—there is no possibility that the suspects have collaborated in the crime. Also, you may wonder whether there could be the sort of exact equilibrium under discussion in cases in which the evidence is as different as is indicated. If you are troubled by this, change the case slightly so that each party clearly is implicated by a small, and equal, amount of exactly the *same* sort of evidence.

4. If, as suggested, there are cases of simple ambiguity in which the only reasonable way to respond is to suspend judgment, we should not consider its being reasonable to take a number of positions on the relevant issue as a necessary condition of ambiguity. So I have not done so. We could redefine things so that this is in fact a necessary condition of ambiguity. In that case, of course, the aforementioned putative instances of simple ambiguity in which suspension of judgment is the only reasonable way to respond would not be instances of ambiguity at all.

The Available Evidence

Simple ambiguity has little application in the area of religion, so I will not discuss it further, though I will comment briefly on one issue that surfaced in our discussion of it. As mentioned, a feature of simple ambiguity is that there is little available evidence to consider. This notion of "little available evidence" requires clarification—actually more clarification than I can provide here. First, we need to clarify the notion of the *available evidence*. This certainly should not be understood along the lines of "all the evidence that people who are reflecting on this situation are currently aware of" since people can fail to be aware of evidence that, so to speak, stares them in the face. Evidence can be available even if people do not avail themselves of it when they easily could.

Rather, the idea of the available evidence is best understood as indexed to our cognitive capacities. It is evidence that a human being is capable of being aware of, given the human cognitive apparatus. It is neither, on the one hand, the evidence that is available to, say, a goldfish nor, on the other hand, the evidence that is available to God, if God exists.

The evidence concerning some matter that is available at some level of cognitive ability might exhibit the sort of equilibrium that is a feature of simple ambiguity, while such an equilibrium is not present in evidence concerning this same matter that is available to beings at other levels of ability. Thus the available evidence with respect to some matter might exhibit this feature at the human level but not do so for beings that are either more or less intellectually able than we are. And it might be that if we were intellectually much abler than we are, we could have a clear view of evidence that would disambiguate something that is currently ambiguous to us or, for that matter, that would render ambiguous matters that currently lack ambiguity for us. While this is a matter of speculation, in matters of religion in particular, it behooves us to take seriously the possibility that there are matters that we find to be ambiguous because of human limitations. For one thing, putative objects of worship are typically understood by those who understand themselves to worship them to far exceed human comprehension. And the frailty and inadequacy of the human cognitive apparatus in this context are generally, and for good reason, taken for granted.

The notion of evidence that is available to a human being requires additional clarification. To which human beings is the evidence available? The average human being? The average human being with secondary education? What about tertiary education or a PhD? And for the evidence to be available, must it be obvious—perhaps to the point where one to whom it is available would be foolish to ignore it? Or is it enough that with some effort it would be comprehensible? If so, how much effort?

A full account of the idea of the available evidence would require answers to these questions. Not knowing how to provide such answers, I will settle for something less complete and less clear. I will just assume that the relevant evidence is evidence that is available to human beings, bearing in mind that this will remain a somewhat unclear idea. To say that there is *little* available evidence is just to say it can be taken in by us with ease.

Rich Ambiguity

There are various respects in which ambiguity can be less simple. Rather than attempt to give a comprehensive account of the umpteen ways in which this can be so and hence of the umpteen varieties of ambiguity that we could distinguish, I will take a shortcut. I will attempt to identify the salient features of the sort of ambiguity that, in my view, is exhibited in the case of certain important religious matters. I will do so in two stages. First, I will describe in broad strokes the distinctive elements of what I call "rich ambiguity." Then, in the next section, I will turn to a particularly relevant sort of rich ambiguity.

If there is rich ambiguity, the various necessary conditions for there to be ambiguity (of any sort) will be satisfied. Thus there is a significant amount of evidence for more than one proposal or hypothesis. Given the available evidence, none of the competing hypotheses can be proven correct. More broadly, none of them is correct in an overwhelmingly obvious sort of way. Nor does the evidence clearly favor one hypothesis over the others.

The other ingredients in this idea of rich ambiguity are as follows. First, there is the matter of the amount of available evidence. A defining characteristic of richly ambiguous situations is:

(a) There is an abundance of relevant evidence.

In addition, the following four conditions obtain:

(b) This evidence is diverse in its character, multifaceted, and complicated.
(c) There are discrete pockets of evidence that are particularly congenial to advocates of particular interpretations of the evidence.
(d) The advocates of different hypotheses disagree about the status of some, or even much, of the putative evidence.
(e) Because the foregoing conditions, (a)–(d), are met, it is very difficult to tell whether there is more evidence for one side or the other.

A few comments on these conditions. When (c) obtains, people who take different points of view can each have something significant to go on. Each

relevant group has its own evidence to which it can appeal. When (d) obtains, one group sees evidence for its position where others do not do so, or at any rate has a perspective on its role as evidence that others lack. The disagreement may concern whether alleged phenomena occur or whether, given that they occur, they are evidence of the sort claimed by one or more parties. And to say that (e) obtains is to say that there is little hope of quantifying the evidence precisely. Any parity there may be is likely to be rough and a matter of debate. We are not likely to find the sort of equilibrium that is a defining feature of simple ambiguity. Nor is it likely to be possible to measure with the sort of precision that would be required to discern whether there is an equilibrium.[5]

Extremely Rich Ambiguity

Next I turn to a special sort of rich ambiguity. I call it *extremely rich ambiguity*. Its distinguishing feature is that in addition to sharing the features of rich ambiguity, it occurs when the available evidence is *superabundant*. The evidence far exceeds what it would take to be considered abundant. In particular, no single person can have access to anything more than a small portion of the available evidence. It is impossible for anyone to examine all of it, and it is impossible for anyone to tell whether, all things considered, it supports one hypothesis rather than another. A comprehensive perspective that takes account of all of the relevant evidence is out of the question, and only a partial perspective is feasible. Any assessment of the overall import of the evidence would be speculative. And the task of disambiguating such a situation far exceeds our abilities. In cases of this sort—given that they exhibit all of the other features of rich ambiguity—it is all the more true that people who take different points of view can have their own body of evidence to which they can appeal.

Whether a situation is richly ambiguous or, for that matter, extremely richly ambiguous may be far from obvious. It may take some work to figure this out. Many people may be convinced that it is not the case even when it is so. They may look at things from a perspective from which particular pieces of evidence

5. In the second sentence of this section, I mentioned the variety of interpretations of what ambiguity consists in. As I say there, I will make no attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the possibilities. However, some of the alternatives are already apparent. Thus we might consider there to be ambiguity whenever the necessary conditions of ambiguity are met. And if we consider the entire set of characteristics that we have found to be either necessary conditions of ambiguity or among the definitive features of either simple or rich ambiguity, there may be a number of subsets of this full set of characteristics that are candidates for interpretations of ambiguity.

are especially easily noticed or from which all evidence that might be troublesome to their perspective is somehow rendered nugatory. What is appealing about the perspectives of others may not be apparent, and it may be difficult to discern what it is about the evidence that is congenial to those perspectives. In such situations, it may seem to those who have a particular perspective that others could not possibly have enough going for them for their views to be reasonable. In such situations, getting yourself to the point where you can see that a number of perspectives can reasonably be adopted with respect to the available evidence would require acknowledging that the situation as a whole is in a very important respect beyond you. It may require empathy and imagination or even a particular course of instruction.

The range of appropriate responses varies greatly between situations that exhibit simple ambiguity and situations that exhibit extremely rich ambiguity. If you recognize that there is simple ambiguity, then the reasonable response to the situation is just to suspend judgment. How should we respond if we conclude that a situation exhibits rich ambiguity, including the extremely rich sort? Actually, if we as much as suspect that we are in a situation in which there is extremely rich ambiguity, humility and caution should be our watchwords. In addition, someone who recognizes that there is extremely rich ambiguity in some area, and hence an abundance of relevant evidence that he is not aware of, when that is indeed the case, is seeing more deeply than someone who just considers, say, the part of the evidence that is congenial to his own antecedent point of view and continues to adhere to that point of view, remaining oblivious to the fact of extremely rich ambiguity. Moreover, someone who looks at a richly ambiguous situation (and this includes cases of the extremely rich sort) and just sees what is to be said for and against a number of positions while being aware that there are vast stretches of relevant evidence to which he does not have access, and leaves it at that—not arriving at any view at all about what it all adds up to—is responding in a reasonable way.

Nevertheless, one can reasonably combine recognition that there is such ambiguity with endorsement of a particular interpretation of the evidence. For one thing, in such a situation, you do not know how things would look if you had access to all of the evidence, and it may be reasonable to believe (or to have some confidence, or to hope) that overall a stronger case could be made for your position than for any of the alternatives. If everything were taken into account, the balance of evidence would presumably favor some particular point of view. And the evidence you have most access to—your evidence—supports your point of view. Also, once someone believes there is rich ambiguity, his reasons for adopting any particular position are accordingly diminished in force, though it does not follow that they are diminished so low that it is no longer reasonable to adopt any such position.

Religion Satisfies the Necessary Conditions of Ambiguity

Naturally, my main interest is in the payoff of these notions for the study of religion. The believer who, in the extreme case, at almost every waking moment feels himself to be in the presence of God and who feels guided by God at every turn does not consider the world to be religiously ambiguous. How could he? He sees evidence on all sides. And the unbeliever who, in all honesty, can see nothing that seems to her to give any reason to think that God exists and to whom religious belief seems nothing more than wishful thinking is in the same boat. These two camps, at least, will deny that the phenomena that religions purport to describe exhibit rich ambiguity or, for that matter, ambiguity of any sort. They both consider the facts of the situation to be obvious—although there is a remaining detail about which they disagree, namely, what the facts in question are. I will argue that we should not purchase the wares of these merchants of certainty. In doing so, I will focus on the issue of the existence of God, though my view is that the arguments I deploy admit of wider application.

There is considerable reason to believe that the necessary conditions of ambiguity are satisfied in this case. It seems, for a start, that neither the evidence for nor the evidence against God's existence is overwhelming. For example, it appears that neither a proof nor a disproof of God's existence—which is to say a sound deductive argument with the relevant conclusion—is available to us. Next, to narrow the discussion still further, I argue that the evidence surrounding the existence of God provides a clear case neither for nor against the existence of God. I will present five reasons for believing that this is so. In doing so, I understand myself to be identifying a significant necessary condition of this being an ambiguous issue.

First, the fact that people of integrity take both positions is relevant. This suggests that a clear case cannot be made for one rather than another position concerning this matter. If reasonable people hold each position, there is reason to think that both positions are reasonable.

Second, the topic of religious experience is relevant in a number of respects. It is sometimes proposed that, in virtue of certain experiences they enjoy, people are aware of God or of God's actions or character in such a way that they have available to them a compelling case for God's existence. And it is uncontroversial that the lives of theists include much experience that seems to them to be indicative of the truth of their theistic beliefs. Both manifestly religious experiences and ordinary experiences that are interpreted in a theistic way are relevant here. Such experiences call into question the proposal that there is available a clear case against the existence of God.

Yet believers often characterize their awareness of the presence of God as sketchy. Thus William P. Alston, in the course of his sustained and rightly

celebrated defense of the reliability of practices in which people understand themselves to perceive God, says that the relevant perception of God is usually "dim, meager, and obscure" (*Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991], 36, 208). Experience that is dim, meager, and obscure is not the sort of experience that would provide a clear case for any hypothesis. It may be that not all putative perception of God is of this sketchy and uncompelling character. But it seems that much of it, at any rate, is.

The fact that people of integrity in different traditions regard various parts of their experience as supporting tradition-specific interpretations of God's nature, purposes, states of mind, activities, and so forth is also relevant. One possibility that is suggested by this variety of construals of the experiences that are reported on is that those parts of their experience to which believers appeal do not clearly lend themselves to being interpreted in one way rather than another. Jacob Joshua Ross nicely refers to this issue as the question of whether there is "a sort of under-determination belonging to the experience as such" ("The Hiddenness of God—A Puzzle or a Real Problem?" in Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, eds., *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 187). Consider an example. A theist loses her way in a forest and prays to God for help with finding her way out. And then she manages to find her way out. She takes what she has experienced to involve divine intervention, and she construes this intervention in terms of her understanding of the divine purposes, nature, and so on. But the situation is very much open to interpretation. She was lost, she prayed, and then she found her way out. But how? What connects the two? The sequence of events does not tell us—it does not even tell the person who is central to the case—what connects the one with the other. Or a theist feels discouraged, prays for strength, and then finds herself strengthened. Did the prayer help in a purely psychological way, or was there an actual divine intervention? And so on. It is not out of the question that some group is special in that they alone have special experiences that place them in a unique position to determine with clarity what is the case. We should not rule this out. More generally, it is possible that some have reasons that others lack. Yet it is obvious that each tradition feels special in such respects as this. We should be wary of all claims to be unique in such respects.

Third, there are some relevant considerations that have to do with the fact that people sometimes change their religious beliefs. Consider the possibility of loss of theistic belief. Theists generally consider such a loss to be something that it is important to take steps to avoid. This indicates that they think there to be a danger of losing belief. Also, many believers of the most devout and convinced sort sometimes find themselves wondering quite sincerely whether God exists, perhaps when they are in circumstances of difficulty or hardship or when they find others in such circumstances. But if they had at their disposal a clear case for the existence of God, they probably would never find themselves so situated.

Nor would loss of belief be something that it would be necessary to guard against. Moreover, the fact that theists sometimes lose their belief in God suggests that they did not have at their disposal in the first place a clear case for the existence of God. Corresponding reasoning applies to the fact that people of integrity adopt religious beliefs: this speaks against the availability of a clear case against the existence of God.

A fourth consideration bears specifically on the absence of a clear case *for* theism. Theists have proposed many explanations of why a clear case for God's existence is unavailable and, indeed, of why it is a good thing that this is so.[6] For example, they have said that this provides us with moral autonomy or with the freedom to make up our minds about what to believe. The abundance and variety of these explanations bespeak a widespread recognition among theists that a clear case for God's existence is lacking.

Fifth, and this bears, too, on the absence of a clear case *for* theism, the dominant cultural ethos at some times and in some places makes belief that God exists much easier than it is at other times and in other places. Thus many people in Buddhist countries, for instance, just do not encounter the belief that God exists as a viable or live option for belief. It is not among the array of possibilities that their culture delivers to them. In general, the role of tradition in the area of religion is very great. Thus, typically, it is only if the traditions, practices, and institutions of a group are thriving that the beliefs associated with it are maintained and transmitted successfully. I take the fact that cultural transmission of religious belief is so important in determining whether someone accepts it, with some cultures or groups making this belief available and some failing to do so, to be a function of the fact that a clear case for the truth of the belief is not available.

Together, these points provide considerable evidence that people are not in possession of a clear case on either side, at least in the case of this particular contentious matter.

Religion Exhibits Rich Ambiguity

The issue of the existence of God and, indeed, religious issues in general do not exhibit simple ambiguity. For one thing, there is an abundance of relevant evidence. In addition, it is doubtful that the relevant evidence has the particular feature of balancing out or parity that is a defining feature of simple ambiguity. It may be that if you restrict your reflections to some portion of the available

6. I examine many such proposals in chapters 2 through 4 of *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*.

evidence—to, perhaps, on the one hand, the fine-tuning evidence (in virtue of which conditions on earth are remarkably well suited for life) and, on the other hand, the problem of evil or some version thereof—the evidence may seem to balance out. But even that would be a very questionable seat-of-the-pants judgment. And the proposal that the evidence as a whole does so is all the more questionable. So simple ambiguity is not the right furrow to plow. What about rich ambiguity? Actually, the issue of the existence of God exemplifies all five of the conditions that characterize rich ambiguity. Indeed, one merely needs to state the distinguishing features of rich ambiguity and then consider the question of the existence of God to see that this is so. The main defining features, recall, were that there is an abundance of relevant evidence; that this evidence is diverse in its character, multifaceted, and complicated; that it contains discrete pockets of evidence that are particularly congenial to the advocates of particular interpretations of the evidence; that one group regards as evidence phenomena that are not so regarded by other groups; and that it is extremely difficult to tell whether there is more evidence for one side or the other.

I will not make this case in any detail, but here are some relevant considerations. That there is relevant evidence in the case of the existence of God is clear enough. The evidence in question includes every phenomenon and consideration that either supports or counts against belief in God. The evidence *for* the existence of God includes, as mentioned, the fine-tuning data. In addition, widespread reports of experience of God on the part of honest and intelligent people provide everyone with some evidence for God's existence. This is so even in the case of those who do not enjoy such experiences and who only hear about them from others they deem reliable. Of course, in assessing the import of this evidence, we have to take into account the fact that these reports are provided from within a bewildering array of traditions. And we have to take into account the fact that participants in the nontheistic traditions also report experiences that seem to them to confirm the account of reality that their tradition presents. But it hardly follows from these qualifications that apparent experiences of God provide no evidence for the existence of God. On the other hand, the evidence *against* God's existence includes, as mentioned, the presence of evil in the world. Serious attempts have been made to explain how it is that all the evil in the world is consistent with God's existence. But it is not clear that these attempts succeed, and I think it is reasonable to conclude that the evils in question provide some evidence against God's existence. Again, considerations to which believers in God are inclined to appeal in support of their beliefs are often open to nonreligious interpretations. By way of example, appeals to the fine-tuning of the universe confront the challenge of naturalistic appeals to the many-universes hypothesis, to the possibility that we are the immensely fortunate beneficiaries of sheer good luck, and to the possibility of an as-yet-undiscovered scientific explanation of fine-tuning. Moreover, as a general rule, large-scale apologetic

maneuvers that can be made on behalf of one religion can be made on behalf of the others.[7]

These considerations can be further buttressed by what I shall call the argument from philosophical and theological debate. Much of the work of theistic, atheistic, and other philosophers of religion and theologians is relevant here, in particular those aspects of such work that go beyond the arguments and considerations alluded to in the last paragraph. And there is much more to be taken into account, such as relevant parts of the modern biological sciences. Moreover, always barking at the heels of anyone engaging in reflection about religion come the hounds of naturalism. It is dishonest to pretend that they are not to be heard or to create enough of a racket of one's own that they are drowned out. The honest approach is to incorporate an awareness of the possibility that religion is entirely a human construct. This is part of what is involved in recognizing the religious ambiguity of the human situation.

I want to highlight the relevance of item (d) in the account of rich ambiguity: the fact that some see as evidence for a hypothesis they favor what others think not to constitute such evidence. I have in mind, in particular, the following sort of case. A believer in God prays to God for help. He is in physical pain and feels distress. Perhaps he is being tortured by people who demand that he provide them with information that he does not have. He is getting weaker, has not had anything to eat or drink, has not been allowed to sleep, and has been insulted, sexually humiliated, and abused. He prays to God for help. Having engaged in prayer, he feels strengthened. He feels that a weight has been lifted from him. Perhaps he finds that he now has ways of thinking that enable him to deal with his difficulties. He thanks God, and, if he were to think in terms of how much evidence he has for his beliefs, he would feel that he has encountered fresh evidence for those beliefs.

If his problem remains unsolved and his situation does not seem to improve in any respect, he may feel that he is meant thereby to learn a lesson. Perhaps he is meant to acquire patience or fortitude, to cultivate acceptance, or to better understand the suffering of others. These, he surmises, are just the sort of lessons that you would expect to receive from a good, compassionate, and worship-worthy God. In fact, God is to be thanked for such lessons, not least because they have been carefully tailored to his needs. In addition, the character of his pain or distress is altered by making it the object of prayer. It is more manageable, being construed now as a burden to be borne with patience and fortitude. He may see

7. To show that this is the case across the board would be a truly daunting project. However, by way of example, I have argued that the basic belief apologetic of Alvin Plantinga admits of application to other traditions in "Theism and Proper Basicality," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 22: 29–56, 1989. I have made the corresponding case for the doxastic practice apologetic of William P. Alston in chapter 11 of *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*.

his ability to adapt in such respects to provide further evidence for his beliefs. Moreover, the character of the difficulty he confronts has changed just in virtue of the fact that he has taken control of his situation by making it the object of prayer. Rather than passively being at the receiving end of events, he has taken action, invoking the resources that he has at his disposal and being empowered in the process. He is thankful for the ability to do so. "Show me the evidence for God's existence," says the nonbeliever. "But I have it at almost every moment," says the believer. Or at least, so say many believers much of the time.

On the other hand, the nonbeliever, thinking that there is nothing beyond the physical and what is dependent on or emergent from the physical, and that the religiously significant realities posited by the believer are nonexistent, has a different perspective. Problems and situations are approached differently. What the nonbeliever encounters probably does not seem as if it needs to be accounted for in the way in which the believer proposes to account for what he encounters. And solutions that the believer feels she has to her problems seem unnecessary or even unintelligible. Making up his mind about what to do in some situation feels just exactly like that: making up his mind. There is no sense of being guided or directed by the sorts of beings or entities or states that religions uniquely posit. He reflects about how to respond in some situation, and it comes to him what he should do. He may be happy to acknowledge that it is psychologically beneficial to some people to pray to God for help—or rather to engage in an activity that the believer characterizes in this way. But he sees no reason to believe that any such help is forthcoming from an external source.

In fine, in the debate between the believer and the nonbeliever, there is an important respect in which there is a lack of agreement about what the relevant evidence is. There certainly are ways of characterizing what the believer takes to be her evidence for her position such that the nonbeliever will readily concede that the evidence in question is a reality. Thus they can both agree that the believer feels she is divinely guided and divinely strengthened or that the believer's prayers are psychologically beneficial. There can, in short, be ways to describe the evidence that are sufficiently neutral that both sides can sign off on those descriptions. Still, there will be cases in which to characterize the experiences of the believer in a neutral way that both can sign off on will be unfair to the believer, setting her at one remove from what she actually experiences, rendering that experience in a key that will not seem to her to do justice to it.

So to repeat, if you consider what it is for there to be rich ambiguity and then contemplate our situation vis-à-vis matters of religious import, it is apparent that this situation is richly ambiguous. In addition, the fact that large numbers of people of integrity have come to such different conclusions can do double duty. It serves not merely as a reason to believe that a significant necessary condition of ambiguity has been met; it is also a reason to believe that the relevant matters are richly ambiguous.

It is obvious that for every careful theist who adds up what he thinks to be the relevant evidence and gets a result that supports theism, there is an equally careful nontheist who gets an entirely different result. For every theist to whom the facts of her experience appear to confirm that God exists, there are equally well-qualified nontheists, including members of nontheistic religions, agnostics, and atheists, to whom it appears that their experience has no such significance. On the contrary, their experience seems to them to be consistent with what they believe. Apparently painstaking attempts to assess the import of the evidence arrive at utterly different conclusions. In a number of traditions, there are people of integrity who feel that they are on the correct path, who are utterly convinced of the truth of their tradition, and whose own experience seems to them to fit with what they believe. Moreover, debates about religion exhibit a sort of stalemate in which everyone, or at least many people, feel eminently entitled to believe as they do and yet find themselves unable to make much headway in persuading others that they are right. While it is not the only conceivable explanation of why all of this is so, rich ambiguity is an excellent candidate for such an explanation.

Rich ambiguity provides a very good explanation of the fact of diversity, and we have a lot of other evidence for it, too. Yet while I believe that many religious matters exhibit rich ambiguity, I doubt that this can be *shown* to be the case, either in the case of the large-scale disagreement among the worldviews associated with the major traditions or, for that matter, even in the case of the single issue to which I have devoted the most attention, namely, the existence of God. For example, it cannot be shown that it is not true that—all things considered—the facts about the existence of God are discernible but only with insight, or only by some uniquely privileged individuals, or only after certain training, and so forth.

Religion Exhibits Extremely Rich Ambiguity

Part of my case for the issue of the existence of God exhibiting *extremely rich ambiguity* is this. Suppose I am a Wesleyan Methodist who can attest to a sense of having felt my heart "strangely warmed" by what I take to be the presence of God. In that case, an important part of my evidence for God's presence, and hence God's existence, is provided by just this very sense of the presence of God. Moreover, this experience of mine is part of the evidence that *anyone* who is thinking about this matter would need to take account of, even if the significance of the experience is reduced for others once it has been filtered through my testimony. And someone who is assessing the evidence for and against the existence of God and who is unaware of my experience and of the difference it has made to me (or at any rate, of experiences like mine and the difference they

make to those who have them) is missing something very important and very relevant. But then the same reasoning applies to the religious experience of others, including others about whom I know little or nothing. Some may indulge in the fantasy that only *their* religious experiences are to be counted. But this sentiment is not to be taken seriously. Probably it is particularly common among those with little acquaintance with religious traditions other than their own. From within the shadow of the parish pump, even a hazy sense of distant landscapes can be hard to achieve. And *that* fact, too, is hard to discern from that particular location.[8] Advocates of particular traditions, therefore, should recognize that they are not qualified to talk comprehensively. They are mainly qualified to talk about their home territory, religiously speaking. And there are many such home territories.

It is an interesting fact that people who consider the religious experiences of others to be part of the evidence have reason to believe that no one can have access to all of the available evidence. Assuming that no one is faking their experience (and that is out of the question once we are dealing with people of integrity), there are great swaths of relevant evidence and in particular the religious experiences of most others to which none of us has access. So the extraordinary variety of types of religious experience, especially across traditions, itself provides the basis for a case for extremely rich ambiguity.

Consider the following by way of example. Suppose that during prayer a believer has a tremendously strong sense of needing to be forgiven and of needing to feel guided and strengthened by God. Nothing else will satisfy him. After further prayer, he feels forgiven, guided, and strengthened and feels enriched by the process. An outsider who never felt such a need in the first place may understand neither what it was to feel that need nor what it was like to feel that it had been met.

Here is another example, this time a historical one. It is drawn from the memoirs of Zilpha Elaw, a nineteenth-century African American woman who describes her experience of conversion to Christianity, her subsequent experience of sanctification, and her work as an evangelist.[9] There are many aspects to what she reports: the role of dreams and visions in her conversion, the sense of

8. Ah, so you think that your experience is important, that it needs to be taken into account. Have no fear: we treat it with complete seriousness. But you are not the only person whose experiences are to be taken seriously. Part of the appeal of the position under discussion is that it takes everyone's experience and general situation seriously.

9. My source for information about Zilpha Elaw is Yolanda Pierce, "African-American Women's Spiritual Narratives," in Dale Bauer and Philip Gould, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to 19th Century Women's Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 244–261. Zilpha Elaw's memoir ("Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw") is published in William Andrews, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

being overpowered at the time of her sanctification or "second blessing," and her sense of being called to evangelism. She describes the aftereffects of sanctification thus:

> I enjoyed so intimate and heavenly an intercourse with God, that I was assured He had sent an angel to instruct me in such of His holy mysteries as were otherwise beyond my comprehension. Such communications were most gratifying and delightful to me. . . . I had sufficiency from God for the proclamation of His gospel. *Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God*. 2 Corinthians 3: 5. (Yolanda Pierce, "African-American Women's Spiritual Narratives," 252)

Mrs. Elaw was a freed woman whose ministerial efforts were dangerous and put her at risk of capture, whose husband discouraged her, and who struggled to preach before racially mixed groups and before men and women. If I understand these facts about her and if I make a serious effort, it is perhaps possible for me to get a slight grasp of some small part of this woman's religious experiences. And her experiences are part of the relevant evidence when it comes to the question of the existence of God. Needless to say, one can find with little difficulty numerous such reports from numerous individuals within numerous traditions.

Anyone who considers the religious experiences of others to be part of the relevant evidence should acknowledge that each of us cannot but be abysmally ignorant of vast stretches of the relevant evidence. In particular, each of us lacks access to what it would be like to adopt numerous other perspectives, with whatever experiences are attendant upon doing so. What has to be considered includes the warp and woof of the lives of many devout practitioners over centuries. I have in mind, in particular, access to experience that is to be had only if one authentically lives the sort of life that goes along with being a full participant in a religious tradition and navigating one's way through daily dilemmas and challenges while in the grip of a certain religious interpretation of reality. In saying all of this, I do not mean to commit myself one way or the other on the question of whether understanding requires believing or, more generally, whether understanding requires authentic participation. If this is not the case, understanding the experience of others remains immensely difficult, requiring a great deal of effort and extensive experience and training. It therefore cannot be engaged in casually; at most, it can be engaged in partially in the case of one or perhaps two traditions. On the other hand, if it is the case that understanding requires authentic participation, the presence of extremely rich ambiguity is all the more apparent. And there are additional daunting questions such as this one: how many perspectives deserve to be taken account of? For example, should we

include only experiences that are associated with major historically significant religious traditions? And only with those that continue to be major players on the world stage? And so on.

What we have seen so far in this section is an argument from the varieties of religious experience for extremely rich ambiguity. Of course, this is only a fragment of the relevant total evidence. Everything mentioned in the last section, including the multitude of types of evidence and the argument from philosophical and theological debate, is relevant here, too. In general, the multifarious character of the evidence is such that people in different communities have much to go on. And this applies to atheists and agnostics as readily as it applies to Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and so forth. Everyone has a great deal to point to. We can talk in a theoretical and vague way about all of the evidence being considered from all perspectives. But that is about as far as we can go. If the evidence really exhibits extremely rich ambiguity, there is no possibility that a single individual can make much progress in this regard. Different people have access to different bodies of evidence, and there is no such thing as having access to all of the evidence.[10]

10. Some propose that on matters of religious import we think in terms of making an informal cumulative case for some position. This move is proposed by its advocates neither as a matter of assessing probabilities nor as a matter of providing a proof or a disproof, for example. Rather, it is said to require judgment and sensitivity. These are said to enable one to fit the various pieces of evidence together into a coherent whole, opting in the process for an entire picture of how things are. William Abraham writes as follows of such a process: "There is an irreducible element of personal judgment, which weighs up the evidence taken as a whole . . . [and] which cannot be measured by a formal calculus but which can be trained and rendered more sensitive" (*An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985], 106). The *locus classicus* for this approach is Basil Mitchell's *The Justification of Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). Certainly, this proposal is worthy of consideration. But it is one thing to say that such a case can be made for some perspective and quite another to make it. Since the process involved is said to be a rather private one, involving one's own judgments and sensitivities, it may not be possible to communicate it to others. More to the point, many groups make essentially the same sort of claim, claiming that what they regard as their unique insights are what you will come to if you have the requisite insight, sensitivity, judgment, and so on. Most important, in any area in which we have as much as reason to suspect that there is ambiguity of the sort under discussion, we have reason to be suspicious of all attempts to take account of everything relevant. Such an approach cannot avoid being highly selective. If there is ambiguity of the sort under discussion, a comprehensive approach in which one "weighs up the evidence taken as a whole" is out of the question. And I think I have provided much more than *reason to suspect* that there is extremely rich ambiguity. For that matter, I am certain that the points of view expressed in this book exhibit just the sort of limited perspective that is unavoidable for all of us. Even if I were to expand my own perspective and relevant knowledge tenfold, which I might just manage to do if I were to make this my main objective in the course of my entire life, I would still miss vast stretches of relevant evidence; I would still be uncomprehending in numerous areas; I would still lack an appreciation of numerous perspectives. This is the unavoidable human experience.

What you would expect when there is extremely rich ambiguity is that many groups are convinced that they come out ahead when the various positions are evaluated in light of the evidence and that each group would focus on some body of evidence in terms of which it appears to come out ahead. And this is precisely what we find in the case of the large-scale disagreement among those who endorse different religious worldviews. Indeed, they may in fact come out ahead in terms of the particular body of evidence on which they focus, for the defenders of a particular tradition may be entirely accurate in their identification of some of the advantages of their own tradition. (Isn't this what we should expect?) Nevertheless, it does not get us very far for features that are distinctive of a tradition, or are believed to be distinctive, and that perhaps represent its strong points to be trotted out by way of making a case that will be altogether convincing to the true believers and unpersuasive to others. An all-things-considered comparison, however, would be quite another matter, and that is what extremely rich ambiguity renders unobtainable.

There is no suggestion in any of this that anyone arbitrarily selects his worldview. Probably people generally make sense as best they can of their situation and draw on what they are familiar with. Indeed, I take it to be obvious that many people in many religious traditions have reasons to be in their tradition. For a start, their tradition probably fits with their experience in a general sort of way in that the beliefs associated with their tradition provide them with a way to interpret much of their everyday experience. Again, people probably have learned the ways of their tradition, including both the beliefs and the practices that are associated with it, from sources that they have every reason to believe to be reliable, such as their parents or the elders in their community. The fact that they have heard from a reliable authority that such and such is true has to be counted as part of the evidence to which they have access. People may also feel a sense of obligation to be faithful to their religious community, or to their tradition, or to the ways of their ancestors, and so forth, and it may seem to them that they have reason to take these feelings seriously. They may have a strong sense that doing so is extremely important. They may also be aware of themselves as members of a particular historical community of like-minded individuals, whose perspective and way of life appear to them to be valuable and worthy of preservation. This may, in fact, be the community in which they have acquired their evaluative criteria and their outlook on life, so that they cherish it on that account. Membership in it may be partially constitutive of who they are. And all of this can be so even if there is rich, or extremely rich, ambiguity.

Additional Thoughts

Extremely rich ambiguity is, I believe, exhibited at the level of large-scale worldviews such as those associated with Buddhism, atheism, Islam, and Christianity. My main concern in this chapter has been to make a case for this being so.

Henceforth, I will assume that it is indeed so, and I will therefore refer to the fact of ambiguity—where the fact in question is the presence of extremely rich ambiguity at the level of large-scale worldviews. However, I do not claim to have shown it to be a fact.

Here are some interesting areas for further inquiry. First, I have proposed that this ambiguity is also manifested in the case of the more specific issue of the existence of God. It may also be exhibited in the character of religious experience itself. One question is how many other issues or phenomena might also exhibit ambiguity. Might, say, the issue of the origins of the universe or the question whether we survive death, for example, do so? And if so, what sort of ambiguity: the extremely rich variety, the merely rich, or some other variety perhaps? One possibility is that extremely rich ambiguity would be exhibited at the macrolevel, where we are comparing entire worldviews, but some other sort of ambiguity would be present at the level of some particular issues. Again, it is entirely consistent with there being extremely rich ambiguity with respect to matters of religious significance at the macrolevel that the evidence with respect to some particular issue (say, the origins of the universe) should—if considered on its own and not taking into account the macrolevel situation—favor some particular hypothesis (say, atheism). An additional, rather complicated area of inquiry is that ambiguity (of whatever sort) at the macrolevel would presumably be itself relevant to how any particular issue is best interpreted. In general, the relationship among these levels—and the associated extent of ambiguity in its various forms—is an interesting area of inquiry.

Second, the relationship between ambiguity and pluralism is worth exploring. The explanation of how it is that different groups are reasonable in interpreting a certain situation or phenomenon in different ways may in some cases be that it can correctly be described in those different ways—even in ways that seem incompatible. This may be so in the case of some issues and not in the case of others. While I assume that on matters of religious import there are facts of the matter, some of the facts in question may be just those that are posited by pluralists. However, the claims I have made about ambiguity do not entail, and indeed do not as much as suggest, that this is so. But here I will leave these interesting questions.

8

Epilogue

Religious Diversity in the Shadow of Ambiguity

Evaluating Religions in the Light of Ambiguity

The religious ambiguity of the human situation casts a long shadow. It is reasonable to evaluate and compare religious traditions in terms of their capacity and willingness to acknowledge this ambiguity and to face up to its implications. I will devote particular attention to some aspects of the implications for responding to religious diversity. Along the way, I will pay some attention to the broader idea of evaluating and comparing religions.

Members of religious traditions generally think that their own tradition is superior to the competition. So they are committed to there being criteria of evaluation in virtue of which this is so. The proselytizing and expansionist traditions, in particular, like to run their own set of comparisons, and each tends to find that, when compared with the competition, it comes out looking best. The contention may be that it does best in terms of truth or in terms of salvation, or in virtue of having engaged in the most careful reflection or the deepest thinking, or in virtue of being most free of culturally added elements and hence most authentic, or in virtue of virtue—which might be a matter of the perceived ethical caliber of one's coreligionists or the ethical standards uniquely associated with one's tradition, or in terms of numerous other considerations. Examples of arguments to the effect that "we do best" are two a penny. And such arguments certainly presuppose that there are standards of evaluation and comparison in terms of which this is so.

Naturally, I will generally restrict my attention to some criteria of evaluation that emerge from the foregoing discussion, including the discussion of ambiguity. But these criteria are a subset of the full set of criteria in terms of which religions may be evaluated. And we can imagine having at our disposal a longer and more comprehensive list of such criteria, even a list that we think to be more or less complete. But that would be a project for another day. It would be natural

to think that the higher the score a tradition, or a strand within a tradition, achieves in terms of any such comprehensive list of criteria, the more impressive it would be and the worthier it would be of our loyalty, all other things being equal. Correspondingly, a low score would make for being less impressive and less worthy of loyalty. There would be much to say about the mechanics of making the relevant evaluations and comparisons and of assigning overall scores that would take into account all relevant criteria. But we are not at a point where we can pursue that project, at least not in anything more than a selective way.

But here is a thought with which to begin our ruminations. Given the fact of ambiguity and especially the attendant difficulty of grasping what it is like to adopt numerous perspectives other than one's own, it would befit each of us to begin by subjecting our own tradition to examination and evaluation, this being the tradition we are most familiar with. We are not well equipped to make detailed, careful, and comprehensive cross-tradition comparisons. Indeed, we have seen two respects in which this is so: our inadequate grasp of the objects of comparison and our inadequate grasp of the criteria of comparison.

In general, as I say, my focus in this final chapter will be on some of the implications of accepting that there is ambiguity for how we approach the matter of religious diversity and for how we think of, and respond to, others. First, though, here are a few more general comments about the implications of ambiguity for what we say about religion. Here there is much to consider, and I will mention a few points in passing.

To recognize that there is ambiguity in a certain area is to concede that you see at best but a small part of the picture and that there is a great deal of relevant evidence to which you do not even have access. What scope there is for belief, and what is appropriate belief, given the fact of ambiguity, is a vast area for discussion. Once you accept that this is a fact, it may be reasonable for the grip you have on your beliefs to become looser and for confidence that any particular position is correct to diminish somewhat.[1] If so, this would have many practical implications.

Then there is the question of attitudes to dissent. For a start, there is a grave and serious error that a tradition can make and in virtue of which it is almost automatically disqualified from being worthy of loyalty. This is the mistake of punishing or ostracizing those who cease to believe, who come to believe tentatively, or who change to another religion. Given the fact of ambiguity, in particular, such a response to abandonment of belief, or to a change in belief, is even more reprehensible than it otherwise would be. In general, the religions do not encourage their adherents to probe, dissect, and question, to take what they choose from the tradition and to discard the rest. Rather, traditions often expect

1. I engage in some discussion of a sort of belief that would involve diminished confidence in chapter 8 of *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*.

their adherents to throw themselves into acceptance and wholeheartedly embrace the associated practices, way of life, and outlook. Indeed, they often go beyond expecting this: when they can get away with it, they demand it. But in light of the fact of religious ambiguity, none of them should be taken seriously in this particular regard. While the traditions set out to satisfy the speculative urges of those who adhere to them, responding to their need to ask "why?" in numerous important areas, they frequently do so in a way that prematurely cuts off questioning and further investigation—except for further investigation within the narrow parameters sanctioned by the tradition. They value too highly adherence to traditional views and preserving loyalty to those views. However alien it may be to them, we should evaluate the traditions with respect to the attitude they take to the value of self-critical inquiry. Indeed, because of the fact of ambiguity, the religious traditions need to think in a way that will at first glance seem contrary to what many of their members may think of as their very raison d'être. They need to keep some space for their members to leave or opt out, and they need to allow members to have some tools that permit them to think their way through the options, even to say *no* to the tradition itself, perhaps in the process saying *yes* to another tradition.[2] This is a tall order.

Perhaps it can be sold on the familiar grounds that an arrangement in which members of all traditions have the wherewithal to opt out of where they find themselves and to choose among a number of options may bring a significant benefit to that tradition. If a tradition is attractive—and most people are convinced of the attractiveness of their own tradition—others will be attracted by it. And if others have the option of opting out of their tradition and are free to go where they please with respect to religious matters, it may seem that they will be drawn to this putatively most attractive tradition. In short, taking steps to ensure that everyone has the ability and the opportunity to opt out of where they find themselves and to locate themselves where they choose may be salable to some traditions on the grounds that it is a fair price to pay for access to potential converts. But it would be better for it to be embraced because it is correct in light of the ambiguity of our circumstances, one of the implications of which is that it is reasonable to subscribe to religious positions other than one's own. In all of these areas, and more, the performance of traditions, where this includes their capacity and willingness to face up to the fact of ambiguity and its implications, can be evaluated and compared.

Finally, an important part of the phenomenon of ambiguity is that naturalistic accounts of religion also have much to recommend them, so that it is a serious possibility that the religions are purely human constructs. This, too, should

2. "No man should be interfered with on account of his religion, and any one was to be allowed to go over to any religion he pleased," according to Akbar, Mogul Emperor of India. Quoted in Vincent A. Smith, *Akbar The Great Mogul* (Delhi: S. Chand, 1966), 186.

be borne in mind at all times. The reasonableness of naturalism, itself part of the wider phenomenon of ambiguity, casts its own long shadow.

Truth: The Global Approach

The idea of recognizing that others may be right about beliefs we do not hold, so that there is a possibility that we might learn from them, was central to my discussion in chapter 3. I revisit it here in light of the discussion of ambiguity. I begin by sketching a larger perspective (the *global approach*) that gives additional content to this idea of being open to learning from others. I do so partly because this idea of the global approach is a lovely and admirable idea whose appeal will be felt by many who encounter it—though I also aspire to providing a case for it.

The global approach requires that each of us sets out to see the point of view of others on matters of religious significance. It involves an open, exploratory, curious approach to others and an attempt to learn about them and their traditions, history, ideas, perspectives, insights, customs, experiences, sacred texts, and more. It asks why anyone should settle for the comparatively meager diet that is to be found within any single religious tradition—given the global abundance of religious ideas, religious texts, religious experience, and so on. Rather than thinking that *my* sacred texts, *my* coreligionists, *my* experiences, and *my* history are the ones that count, the global approach calls for the cultivation of arrangements in which we are open to learning from and about others and they, in turn, are open to learning from and about us. This approach involves taking each other seriously as possible sources of insight and even as possible sources of knowledge. All of human religious experience, including that of the members of other traditions, is viewed as a resource, as part of the relevant data, as something to be curious about, as the proper province of each, when one is thinking about religion.[3] So a vast expanse of religious resources opens up before each of us when we take this approach. For example, to get some remote grasp of the religious experience of others is an immensely difficult task. And there are so many others, and there is so much to learn about each of them. The global approach looks on the major religious traditions as *our* traditions, as part of a common human heritage, and as valuable repositories of forms of life, each of which has its own dignity.

3. Wilfred Cantwell Smith remarks that "young people today not only are, but are beginning to see and to feel themselves as, heirs to the whole religious history of humankind" (*Towards a New Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*, 18). He also makes the bold—indeed, remarkable—assertion that "the new way that we are beginning to be able to see the global history of humankind is presumably the way that God has seen it all along" (18).

If this approach were put into practice, each tradition could expect and would be guaranteed an audience from the others. Each would become an object of reflection and study, an object of respectful curiosity to the others. This approach also requires each of us to consider that if there are perspectives whose appeal is not apparent to us and that seem alien, so that it is difficult for us to have a sense of what matters to those who have adopted them, difficult for us to understand what it is like to be one of them or what it is like to worship or practice as they do, for example—or that even seem foolish or unintelligible to us—the relevant deficiency, if there is one, may lie with us and not with the tradition in question.

The difficulty of adopting the global approach might be formulated as an objection: the point would be just that the global approach represents a hopeless aspiration given, say, the variety of forms of religious experience that need to be understood and taken account of. In addition, human beings seem to have an extremely limited capacity to grasp and to ponder points of view other than their own, and even to have the vaguest grasp of how things look to people from other traditions. So while a vast expanse of religious resources is opened up before each of us, because of ambiguity, each of us cannot take account of more than a limited portion thereof. But the obvious rejoinder to these objections is that the impossibility of taking the global approach in a full and comprehensive way provides no reason to doubt that we should do the best we can in this regard.

On account of the curiosity toward others that it involves, we might refer to the global approach as the "curious approach." Curiosity involves wanting to know about others and being interested in others. But here are two very different types of curiosity. There is, first, a sort of curiosity that involves keeping others at arm's length. This is the curiosity of the detached external observer. You are open to learning *about* them but not *from* them. You can have this sort of curiosity about others while your attitude to them is that they are odd, outlandish, or exotic, for example. You still want to know about them—about, say, their history, beliefs, interests, or conceptual framework—for whatever reason. Maybe this is just the way you are. Some people just catch your interest. Distinct from this is a sort of curiosity that involves a willingness to learn from others, an openness to the possibility that they may know or reasonably believe something that we are unaware of, and an attendant intellectual humility. This is the sort of curiosity that is part of the global approach. When deployed while dealing with religious others, this sort of curiosity is creative, admirable, and inspiring. It does not involve dilettantism, voyeurism, or nosiness. It is instead a courteous and kindly inquisitiveness, a wanting to know you on your terms, not on mine.

On account of the intellectual humility it involves, we could also refer to the global approach as the "humble approach." Among the central components

of this humility are a willingness to engage in critical scrutiny of one's own views, a willingness to accept that one's views may be mistaken, and a willingness to revise one's views. One recognizes that one's tradition is one among many and probably has much to learn from the others. This intellectual humility is valuable in many ways. For example, its possession may help people avoid false beliefs. It may help people become more knowledgeable or more likely to be justified in their beliefs. It may promote the disciplined study of a variety of religious perspectives. It may promote good relations among different groups. It may also be good or even excellent in itself, quite apart from its beneficial consequences. Situations that have the following two features call for intellectual humility. First, such situations concern important issues in the sense that it matters greatly what people think about them, making a lot of difference to how they think and act. Second, in these situations, people of integrity have come to different conclusions. So we have a path from the character of religious diversity to intellectual humility, quite apart from the case for the global approach, and hence for the intellectual humility that it involves, that is derivative from the fact of ambiguity.

There is much to be said about implementing the global approach. If it were to be implemented within existing religious traditions, we might have forms of Christianity that encourage, say, reading the Sufis or the Upanishads and much more besides. We might have forms of Islam that encourage reading the Gospels, Thomas Merton, the teachings of the Buddha, and more besides. And so on for each of the other traditions. Taking this approach could involve, for example, open-ended conversation between partners from different traditions, with no advance idea about where it might lead. Perhaps it would require new institutions. In the absence of such institutions, however, people have no choice but to go it alone within the existing institutions if they take the global approach. Indeed, in our current circumstances in which we lack institutions that would sustain the global approach, each of us has, in fact, to some extent an obligation to go it alone in this respect, with the extent to which any particular individual has this obligation being a function of her abilities, opportunities, interests, relevant knowledge, and so forth.

The possible results of taking the global approach provide another interesting area of inquiry. Perhaps there will emerge from an acquaintance with other worldviews some awareness that the traditions represent a number of honest attempts to grapple with difficult and obscure matters. One's own religion may be seen as somewhat more optional. Views may be toned down in a situation in which a variety of alternatives confront people, perhaps because they find that even without being fully aware of it, they are entering into an inner dialogue with those alternatives. The global approach may foster or encourage new forms of religiousness. Who can say what would emerge if the major traditions were to

take this approach?[4] And who can say what would be the forms of religious practice and observance and the forms of celebration that would emerge?

My earlier case for an openness to learning from others included the familiar point that each religion may understand itself to have something to gain from arrangements in which the members of each tradition are in a position to learn about other traditions. My case also included an appeal to the caliber of those who disagree with us—in particular to the fact that they are people of integrity. In part, the argument was that we ought to respect the rationality and seriousness of such people, where this includes respecting them as people who probably have been responsible in the ways in which they have acquired and maintained whatever beliefs they hold that are relevant to religion. Another part of the argument was that among the processes and strategies we normally and properly use in acquiring and testing our beliefs is the strategy of relying on the views of those who seem to be reliable. Broadly speaking, people of integrity deserve to be included in this category. And such people seem to be found in many traditions. One justification for not being open to learning about other traditions would be that you considered their members to be inferior or careless in their beliefs, for example. But this line of thought is not sustainable once the integrity of members of other groups is recognized.

An appeal to ambiguity serves to buttress this case. In part, the appeal is to the plethora of considerations that sustain the point of view of others. This includes whatever distinctive religious experience others may enjoy. If we believe our situation to be religiously ambiguous, then, even if we know little about what sustains the views of others, such as their distinctive religious experiences, we should at least be aware that there *is* much that sustains their views, even if we do not know what it is. The appeal to ambiguity and the appeal to the integrity of many outsiders mutually reinforce each other. For one thing, the fact of ambiguity provides a way to account for why we disagree with others that does not involve thinking less of them than we think of ourselves or of our own group. Thus a recognition of ambiguity can help to liberate us from the feeling that there is something wrong with those who do not see things as we see them.

The idea of being open to learning from others, which is central to the global approach, admits of a large spectrum of possibilities along the following lines, as discussed in chapter 3. At one end of this spectrum is a slight openness to the possibility that some others have a different perspective on what we both see or

4. David Bohm writes as follows about the outcome of a sort of dialogue that he advocates: "A new kind of mind thus begins to come into being which is based on the development of a common meaning that is constantly transforming in the process of the dialogue" (*Unfolding Meaning* [London: Routledge, 1987], 175, quoted by Lee Nichol, "Editor's Foreword" to David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, x).

to the possibility that others see some things that we do not see, combined with, in either case, some modest degree of willingness to learn something relatively unimportant from such others. At the other end is an enthusiastic, curious, vigorous exploration of other traditions in the search for deeply important truths, an investigation conducted in a spirit of discovery and accompanied even by a willingness to revise what we have antecedently believed. We take others very seriously indeed if we see them as likely possible sources of new beliefs on anything like this scale. So there is a spectrum of possibilities, from the modest to the robust. I take the case that I have offered to support a position that is toward the robust end of the spectrum.

While taking the global approach involves in effect belonging to a larger community of inquirers, it will normally be as a member of a particular tradition that one so belongs. The benefits of belonging to a particular community, including the particular sort of comfort and stability and the shared sense of meaning that issue from belonging, need not be thought of as abandoned by virtue of assuming the larger perspective. One can still identify with one's religious tradition and be deeply attracted to it. One can feel its religious sentiments, hear its call, and feel its appeal, even while concurrently feeling the appeal of the global approach.

Moreover, even if you accept that an area of religious significance exhibits ambiguity, you can nevertheless, without inconsistency, see things from a particular religious point of view. It is natural to pay especially close attention to, and give priority to, the body of data that is most familiar to you, where this includes your own experience. Your own experience has a special immediacy, a special intimacy, and a special accessibility. It probably is experience that is available within the tradition with which you are most familiar, to which you are most loyal, and with which you identify yourself. Normally, the experiences of others are likely to be poorly understood and mediated through testimony, if there is any acquaintance with them at all.

In addition, a recognition that there is ambiguity is consistent with believing that if all of the evidence were somehow accessible to us, it may turn out that the tradition whose claims are best supported by the evidence as a whole is *your* tradition, whether that be Orthodox Judaism, Sunni Islam, Zen Buddhism, or Wesleyan Methodism. There is no reason to deny that there is a way that things are, religiously speaking. Nor is there reason to deny that if somehow we had access to all of the evidence, *some* account of those phenomena that religions purport to interpret would present itself to us as manifestly correct. More important, a recognition that there is ambiguity concerning religious matters may reasonably be combined with confidence or hope or faith on the part of people in various traditions that if somehow all of the relevant evidence were to be taken into account, some of the central tenets of their tradition would be preserved relatively intact. Perhaps those tenets would emerge in modified form.

Or perhaps those tenets, or some of them, would be found to have some special relevance or to exhibit some special insight. This, too, might occur in ways that we cannot now anticipate.

There probably are forms of religiousness, and perhaps even entire religious traditions, that will discourage, reject, or even prohibit an acknowledgment of ambiguity. However, if a persuasive non-tradition-specific case can be made for ambiguity, as I believe to be the case, then it has application even in the case of traditions that are not receptive to it. We should reject the idea that traditions are to be evaluated solely in the terms in which they wish to be evaluated. There is also the question whether a tradition might be modified from the inside to better reflect this ambiguity. The extent to which this might be done and the extent to which one can be an insider in good standing while seeking to make such modifications are worthwhile areas for further inquiry. In spite of any official prohibition, a member of such a tradition might also operate privately with his own sense of what it is to belong, or he might make it a project to reconcile disparate components of his thinking, for example. Last, the ambiguity under discussion calls for more fellow feeling, empathy, and recognition of kindred spirits and fellow travelers across the major traditions.

The global approach calls for exploration of a certain frontier. There are already heroes on this frontier, and John Hick is one of them, regardless of whether we find his particular conclusions convincing. Early explorers provide maps of faraway places that others later improve upon. How much more impressive it is to take it upon oneself to travel far and to provide such a map, as Hick has done, than it is to dig in one's heels and refuse to budge from the home turf or—worse—even to deny that there is anything about faraway places that it is worthy of exploration, as if the shadow of the parish pump could embrace the whole world.

Salvation: Withholding Comment and Generosity

It remains an open question whether the ambiguity under discussion pertains to any particular issue of religious significance. This is so for the issue of salvation, where this includes questions such as whether we survive death, and if so, in what form we do so, and what is the mechanism by which we do so. Rather than probe this issue, which would require at a minimum consideration of some of the main alternative approaches in the case of each of these matters and adducing some of the relevant evidence in each case, I will merely examine one interesting approach that would give expression in this area to the belief that the issue of salvation exhibits ambiguity. Then I want to introduce another lovely idea whose appeal will be apparent to many.

The interesting approach I will examine first is what I shall call "reclusivism about salvation."[5] This comes in many varieties. I will start with a variety that is comprehensive in its implications. The central idea is this:

> R1 We withhold judgment on the entire matter of the salvation of outsiders.

("R" for reclusivism.) On such matters we are silent. We have no views at all about the matter; we have nothing to say. We have no position on the salvific situation of outsiders.

Closely related to R1 is the following idea:

> R2 We withhold judgment on whether outsiders can achieve salvation.

One respect in which R2 differs from R1 is that R2 is at least consistent with our having a view about how the salvation of outsiders would occur, if it were to occur. So to that extent at any rate it differs from R1.

C. S. Lewis may express R2 when he says that "[we] do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know him can be saved through Him" (*Mere Christianity*, 64). And to revisit the episode discussed at the start of this book, these remarks about the position that Billy Graham endorsed late in his career probably attribute R2 to him:

> Even Billy Graham, who, with the possible exception of John Paul II, has preached the Gospel to more people that any other man in human history, acknowledges that God's will is unfathomable. In the summer of 2006 . . . I asked Graham whether a moral secularist or a good Muslim or good Jew would go to heaven. His reply: those decisions are for God to make, not men. (Jon Meacham, *Newsweek*, April 9, 2007)

I assume that Graham's mature view was that the Christian gospel would have a relevance in *any* case in which salvation occurs - even if Graham came to feel some uncertainty about when it occurs.

We might hold R2 because, or partly because, we are unsure whether there are routes to salvation other than ours. This is, in effect, to introduce another matter concerning which we might withhold judgment. Thus our position might be this:

5. I owe the term *reclusivism* and some comments that helped me to begin to think about this topic to Loren Wells.

R3 We withhold judgment on whether there are routes to salvation other than ours.

We might call this *reclusivism about the means of salvation*. However, there are plenty of thinkers who do not endorse R3, and who in addition are confident that there are no routes to salvation other than their own, but who nonetheless endorse R2. As we have just seen, C. S. Lewis and Billy Graham seem to be in this camp.

R1, R2, and R3 are all somewhat controversial in the sense that many within the theistic religions at any rate will oppose them. Much less controversial, in the sense of being much more easily assimilated into theism, is another reclusivist claim:

R4 We withhold judgment on the salvific status of particular outsiders.

R4 is exemplified in these remarks that I read recently in a Bangladeshi newspaper:

> [The correct way to understand verses such as (2:62) and (5:69) and verse (3:85) of the Quran] ("If anyone desires a religion other than Islam [submission to Allah], never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter He will be in the ranks of those who have lost [all spiritual good]") [requires reaching for] the true essence of what Allah Almighty has tried to convey to . . . human beings in His Quran. . . . [and is as follows]. The overall understanding regarding this subject is that Islam, the last of the illustrious lineage of all the religions from Allah, is the one chosen by Him from the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) till the end of time. However, this should not encourage one to shut the door of heaven on anyone's face. . . . [A] lack of wisdom and clarity of thinking often induce one to indulge in self-gratification and [to] assume the authority of issuing [a] passport to Heaven and Hell. This authority solely belongs to Allah . . . and no one should even dare contemplate "this one will go to heaven, that one will go to hell," let alone saying [it] out loud! . . . (letter from Raqibul Mostafa in *The Daily Star* [Dhaka, Bangladesh], January, 28, 2002)

Naturally, one can refrain from having an opinion about particular outsiders while judging that outsiders can achieve salvation and, indeed, that some do in fact achieve salvation, and while taking ourselves to understand how salvation occurs, whenever it occurs. R4 is also compatible with exclusivism about the means of salvation, among many other possibilities. But what it says is that we

cannot tell with respect to any particular individual whether they will achieve salvation.

In the case of the theistic traditions, any of these reclusivist views (R1 to R4) are likely to be understood to give expression to the idea that the divine will in the matter of salvation is inscrutable to us—to a greater or lesser extent in each case. There is room for additional variations on these themes. For example, any of the positions introduced might be restricted in its scope to *some* outsiders.[6] Also, reclusivism might not be restricted to the topic of salvation. It might pertain (as well, or instead) to other aspects of other traditions, such as the extent to which their views are true. On this matter, too, one might decide that one is

6. Thus Harold Netland makes some reclusivist observations but limits their scope to those who have not been evangelized, by which he means those who have not been exposed to the Christian gospel (*Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission*, 320ff.). So he is not commenting on the situation of all non-Christians. To revisit themes touched on earlier, there is, though, a question to be asked about what it is to be exposed to the Christian gospel. For example, does it require merely encountering the relevant views in the sense of being present when someone gives voice to them? Or does it require that the relevant views are presented in such a way that one understands them, or that they be presented in a convincing way? Or must the relevant views actually convince those who are classified as being exposed to them? These are very different options with very different implications for how many people have been evangelized and hence for how limited Netland's reclusivist view actually is. But I will set these details aside. Netland endorses standard evangelical positions on salvation, such as that all human beings are corrupted by sin and that salvation is available only on the basis of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Then he distinguishes three major ways in which evangelical Christians have dealt with the status of the unevangelized. The first two of these, to use my terms, are exclusivism and inclusivism of the piggyback sort. The third group, which is my interest here, actually consists of two subgroups, each of which endorses reclusivism of a sort. The first subgroup adopts "a modest agnosticism regarding the unevangelized, refusing to speculate about how God might deal with [the unevangelized] and leaving the matter in the hands of God." This may be to endorse R1, which involves complete withdrawal from judgment, though with its scope limited to the unevangelized. However, if people in this first group endorse the standard evangelical position that salvation is available only on the basis of the atoning work of Jesus Christ, they are not eschewing all judgment. So the position is not entirely clear to me. Those in the second subgroup, with which Netland identifies himself, are "willing to admit in principle that God might indeed save some who have never explicitly heard the gospel but add quickly that we simply do not know whether this occurs at all or, if so, how many might be saved in this manner" (320ff.). Clarifying his approach, he says that one should not rule out the possibility that nonbelievers who are not familiar with the gospel can be saved through the atoning work of Christ, provided that they develop faith in response to general revelation and "turn to [God] in faith for forgiveness" (323). (I take the idea of the unevangelized turning to God in faith for forgiveness to amount just to the idea of developing faith in response to general revelation. Otherwise, it is hard to see what would be involved, given that the unevangelized might not as much as have the idea of a God.) What he is not ruling out, I think, is the piggyback version of inclusivism about salvation, combined with a particular reading of the conditions that outsiders must meet if they are to come on board. Second, and this is the reclusivist element, he says that one has no basis for speculating as to whether this, in fact, occurs—that is, whether outsiders do come on board—and, if so, how many. At any rate, we see here some creative additional variations on the themes under discussion.

not sure what to say, that one should refrain from speculating about it since it is not one's affair, and that one should restrict one's judgments to one's own case. Maybe there is even room for an all-purpose reclusivism, where we withdraw entirely from comment on other traditions. However, what this would amount to, whether it would make any sense at all, and whether—if there is something here that could in fact be done—it would be prudent or rational to do it are other matters entirely.

Reclusivism can vary in a number of other respects, such as in terms of what is understood to make any particular variety of it attractive or in terms of what is provided by way of justification for it. The justification might include the idea that religious issues, in general, are ambiguous—though, as mentioned, we should not without argument infer from large-scale macrolevel ambiguity that any particular issue, such as the issue of salvation, exhibits ambiguity. We might think we are ill equipped to comment on the salvific status of others, or on some aspects thereof, for other reasons. For example, we might consider ourselves to be too oblivious to our own deficiencies, too aware of those of others, and in general too partial to ourselves, and we might conclude that we should therefore occupy ourselves with improving ourselves rather than with making judgments about others, there being quite enough to occupy us in our own case. Much folk wisdom endorses just such an idea. Or we might feel we lack the requisite spiritual insight or wisdom, and so forth, to form judgments about the salvific status of others.

Withdrawal from comment and withholding judgment in ways such as those mentioned might be motivated by quite a different factor, namely, a lack of interest in other groups and in their ways. We may feel that we should be concerned only with our own tradition or our own community. Hence we may lack any desire to formulate a well-developed position with respect to others, they and their situation not being our affair. This, too, may be fairly common. However, while a lack of interest in others may give rise to, or contribute to, a withdrawal from comment on others, it can certainly coexist with responses other than the reclusivist one.[7] In addition, while withholding judgment about others may arise from a lack of interest in others or, for that matter, out of apathy, indifference, laziness, or selfishness, for example, these are all attitudes that we should reject. For one thing, they are at odds with the global approach. Last, an

7. In the following case, the idea of a lack of interest in others shows up as an aspect of a form of exclusivism (in this case, exclusivism with respect to truth). Jerome Gellman, in "In Defence of a Contented Religious Exclusivism," characterizes a contented exclusivist as someone who "does not consider adjudicating the differences between her home religion and other religions. She does not raise the question whether her home religion really is superior to others. She does not reflect on the issue" (401). Gellman's contented exclusivist is someone who thinks that "her religion is true, and that other religions are false insofar as they contradict her home religion." She thinks that the home religion is superior to others. I cannot do justice here to Gellman's rich and detailed discussion.

awareness that the relevant others are people of integrity—assuming, of course, that we judge this to be so—might also lead us to speak of them with restraint and perhaps to forgo comment on their salvific status, perhaps even entirely. Who, we might ask ourselves, are we to evaluate their salvific prospects?

Some may object to the entire idea of reclusivism on the grounds that some religions may not have much scope for this sort of withdrawal from judgment, especially on an important matter such as salvation. Indeed, not commenting may be contrary to what a tradition requires. It might endorse, say, exclusivism or inclusivism of the piggyback sort and require its members to endorse this position. However, if a persuasive non-tradition-specific case can be made for reclusivism, then it has application even in the case of traditions that are not persuaded by that case. As mentioned, there is no reason to think that traditions should be evaluated only in terms of criteria they themselves endorse.[8] And there is also the question whether a tradition might be modified from the inside so that it would become more reclusivist. The extent to which this can be done and the extent to which one can be an insider in good standing while seeking to make such modifications are worthwhile areas for further inquiry.

Others may object to reclusivism on the grounds that it involves being too accommodating of others, too "nice." But it is not *that* nice—not nearly as nice as, say, universalism about salvation, pluralism about salvation, or a policy of telling others that they are splendid in all respects. More important, only someone in the grip of a peculiar outlook would think that observing that a position is nice constitutes an objection to it. As objections go, this one seems on a par with the objection that a certain position is too respectful of others or too fair-minded, for example. One might reasonably aspire to exhibiting such deficiencies!

8. This point has an interesting set of connections both to my project in this chapter, where my interest is in part to articulate some criteria for evaluating and comparing religions, and also to my project in this book. There is a perspective on the main area of inquiry I have been probing in this book that is related to the point about independent criteria of evaluation but has not been considered and might be presented as an objection. The objection would be along the following lines. There is no place for non-tradition-specific reflection about such matters as the best position to endorse concerning, say, the salvation of outsiders. There are Christian options, Muslim options, Buddhist options, and so on. But there are no all-things-considered everywhere-appropriate options. The relevant sort of discourse lives its life within particular religious traditions. Within each tradition, you can meaningfully ask, "What should we say?" But to ask in general what we should say, where this is unmoored from the specifics of all traditions, is to ask an unfocussed and unanswerable question. My response to this objection is just that there is no reason to rule out the possibility that one tradition could learn from the others and find their ideas to be useful. There is a form of inquiry we can engage in, and in which I have been engaging, and in which religious traditions may be willing to engage. It does not involve canvassing every logical possibility on the matters under discussion but rather working to a considerable extent from within particular traditions, probing what they have to offer. In doing so, we can provide maps or partial maps of some of the relevant landscapes. Basically, the objection reflects an attitude that is unimaginative and oblivious to the ways in which the ideas of one group might be, and often are, useful to others.

I promised to introduce a second lovely idea, this time one that has to do with salvation. This is the idea of a certain sort of generosity in our attitude to the salvific prospects of outsiders. (And just to be completely clear about this, what is under discussion here is generosity that is exhibited in the case of outsiders who remain outsiders.) What I have in mind in particular is the idea that the salvation of others is of greater importance, a more worthy good, than one's own salvation and the salvation of one's own group, the latter being of less consequence. Along with this might go the idea of a mechanism for transmuting self-sacrifice in our own case, in this regard, into promotion of the salvation of others. Perhaps there are Buddhist ideas about the accumulation of merit that satisfy this description.

It may seem unrealistic to expect religious traditions to endorse such ideas as these. Yet a generous attitude on this crucial question of salvation actually fits well with ideals in some of the major religious traditions: generosity, love of neighbor, compassion, self-sacrifice, and a willingness to count the interests of others as being at least as important as one's own interests. Consider, for example, the Christian ideal of agape or the Buddhist ideal of a boddhisattva who forgoes enlightenment until such times as everyone achieves enlightenment. In short, some religions have resources that could be used to challenge a preoccupation with the salvation of their own members and to make a case for a mechanism that would facilitate the salvation of outsiders. Moreover, a combination of lack of preoccupation with one's own case and seeking the advantage of others, salvifically speaking, would be impressive and admirable. A tradition that possesses such a dimension would be worthier of loyalty on account of having such elements.

Generosity on the question of salvation would allay the suspicion that beliefs about salvation are arranged for the benefit of adherents of the tradition within which salvation is understood to be found. The suspicion is that these beliefs are self-serving, that they function as a way to make one feel more secure—to make one feel better about one's own prospects and the prospects of one's coreligionists, for example—and that they are a psychological mechanism to help people deal with difficult circumstances. Some will object in this case, too, that there are traditions that have no way to accommodate such a proposal. But to repeat, traditions should not dictate the terms in which they are to be evaluated, and this is more of an objection to the traditions in question than it is to the proposal. Others will object that what is, in effect, being asked of the traditions is *to make something up*, to graft alien ideas on to their tradition. But first, the generous approach, as noted, is not entirely alien to some traditions. Second, any tradition that objects in this fashion might consider setting out to remedy its deficiencies and exploring what resources it might have that would enable it to endorse the generous approach. Last, to say that this idea of salvific generosity is lovely is certainly to speak on its behalf and to give it a glowing

recommendation. However, as I will shortly explain, within a theistic perspective, the loveliness of a possibility is actually an argument for its being actual.

Based on everything we have seen, including the fact of ambiguity, there is a case to be made for the global approach, including the openness to learning from others, the curiosity, and the intellectual humility that it involves. Everyone should admit how little they know and emphasize the fact that they may be mistaken in their views. Since the traditions are all in the same boat in virtue of the religious ambiguity of the world, it may be best to stick with your own tradition, assuming you wish to belong to a religious tradition. There is no point in switching to another tradition—not at least if you are looking for something that is less questionable than your own. On the matter of salvation, there is an abundance of inclusivistic and indeed pluralistic options that are free of the serious difficulties that confront exclusivism. There is also a case to be made for some degree of withdrawal from comment about the salvific status of others, though there is a spectrum of options in this area and I do not claim to have made a compelling case for any particular option among them. The aspiration to convert others, or for others to be converted to our religion, should be replaced by an aspiration to understand them.[9] Moreover, once you are willing to admit that the entire matter of salvation is one with respect to which we should emphasize what we do not know as much as what we know, there is much less reason to set out to convert those others—although if others wish to join our ranks, what reason would there be to turn them away? We can evaluate and compare the traditions in terms of their willingness to endorse all of these conclusions.

The Object of Worship

Finally, I propose a way in which criteria of evaluation, such as those that have emerged, should be made central to religious traditions. A central idea here is that if a tradition involves an object of worship, how that putative object of worship is understood should reflect whatever criteria of evaluation we believe to be

9. Two unfortunate aspects of the wish for others to convert to your religion are, first, that the mere possession of this aspiration signifies that you are not happy with others as they are. And second, what you are actually committed to is the desirability of other traditions, as such, disappearing. That is what would normally be involved if the members of other traditions were to join yours. The preferable alternative is that others, as they are, should be the object of curiosity (of the sort discussed) and should be approached with a view to seeing what we might learn from them. Another relevant consideration is that the diversity of religious traditions is something to be cherished and protected, especially in the face of pressures that make for cultural homogeneity—with cultural diversity being about as threatened as biological diversity. Recognition of the value of diversity should make us want to preserve other religious traditions. Not perhaps as they are but as they would be if they were to modify themselves in response to the correct criteria for evaluating religions.

correct. I will just discuss the theistic case, in which the putative object of worship is a deity.

Consider the following, as a starting point for reflection. To worship is to hurl yourself with passionate intensity into love of, and adoration toward, the being who is the object of worship, inwardly prostrating yourself before this being. It is, in Charles Wesley's unforgettable phrase, to be "lost in wonder, love and praise."

Presumably, worship should be directed only toward what is worthy of worship. In addition, we can reasonably be expected to worship a being only if it seems to us to be worthy of worship. There can hardly be anything more damaging to one's conception of a putative object of worship, more obstructive of our worship of it, than to conclude that there is something wrong with it, that it is below par in some respect.[10]

Being worthy of worship, by us in particular, would involve many elements. A being who is worthy of our worship would of necessity be far superior to us and far exceed human comprehension. Such a being would also encapsulate perfection along a number of dimensions, including wisdom, knowledge, and goodness. A worship-worthy being would, in particular, be goodness encapsulated on a grand scale. Theism, therefore, involves a magnificent vision, according to which the highest, worthiest, most praiseworthy, most revered, most valuable, and loveliest of things we can imagine are understood to be encapsulated in a reality that is independent of us, that we can encounter, and that we can grasp to some modest extent.[11]

10. It might even be argued that we are *incapable* of worshipping a being that, in our view, does not deserve to be worshipped. A possible line of thought here is that whatever attitude we might have to such a being, it would not count as *worship*. We might—so the point would go—curry the favor of such a being, seek its good will, endeavor to seek a benefit of some sort from it, try to understand what would propitiate it, or make a deal with it. We might need, and be grateful for, its help. We might fear it or be in awe of it. And yet, because we see it as flawed, we would not be worshipping it. The notion of worship that is involved here is along the lines of a self-abandoning prostration of oneself before an object of worship that is considered by the worshipper to be perfect. It is a Wesleyan "lost in wonder, love and praise" sort of worship. On this understanding of what it is to worship, only what is seen by the worshipper as a fitting object of worship, as deserving of worship, is a possible object of worship. But there is another notion of worship that does not assume this—a less elevated cousin, as it were. This other notion of worship has space for, say, devil worship—where this is engaged in by people who do not think that the devil is perfect—and in general has space for an object of worship that is seen by those who worship it to be flawed. I am assuming the Wesleyan idea in my remarks in this section.

11. I will not pursue here the topic of whether, and to what extent, the nontheistic religions involve a counterpart to such a reality. This is actually an interesting area of possible agreement across the traditions, one in comparison with which some of their disagreements may pale into insignificance. In fact we can divide worldviews into those that possess this magnificent element and those that do not.

Consider, in particular, the goodness of the object of worship. We have no option but to understand this in terms of our current grasp of what goodness is. A worship-worthy being, from our point of view, will therefore be one that gives expression to our conception of goodness. Hence attitudes such as humility and curiosity, and in general all of the attitudes and ways of thinking for which a case can be made in light of the fact of ambiguity, should be reflected in our conception of the object of worship. This is so in the straightforward sense that the object of worship is best construed as favorably disposed toward such attitudes. These are among the attitudes that would be expected from us, or that we would be urged to endorse, by any being who would be an appropriate object of worship.

Including in your conception of God both your current recognition of what it would be to be morally admirable and the idea of a positive disposition to everything you consider valuable and lovely—thereby giving a particular content to your idea of a worship-worthy being—is not a matter of fabricating your conception of God. On the contrary, for believers in God, there is no way to avoid a sort of reflection that may result in supplementing or modifying one's conception of God. For a theist, this occurs every time one acquires a new moral insight. If we believe that we make moral progress from time to time, we are thereby in effect committed to thinking that our conception of what would be an appropriate object of worship needs revising from time to time, and if we believe in an object of worship, we are in effect committed to revising how we conceive of it. It is only common sense for theists to think that if we make moral progress in some area, coming to the conclusion that a certain concern is one we should have had all along and that our failure to have it was a deficiency on our part, we are in effect making a discovery concerning the object of worship. Indeed, such modifications are standard practice in the theistic traditions—as exemplified in, say, occasions on which voices that are regarded as prophetic have announced that the deity has a particular preoccupation with the welfare of the worst off.

Our achievement of moral progress may involve deriving a moral insight from others. For a theist to be open to the possibility of getting a moral insight from others is, in effect, for reasons we have just seen, to be open to acquiring from others a somewhat different understanding of what would be an appropriate object of worship and hence of any putative being that is understood to be an object of worship. Being open to learning from others about something as central to one's tradition as an object of worship is therefore not as counterintuitive as it may seem. This point provides, in fact, a whole new dimension to the case for being open to learning from other traditions about matters of religious significance.

And to deal in advance with a potential objection, there is no problem at all in combining worship, or for that matter reverence and even awe, with the idea that one's grasp of the object of worship may be inadequate or misleading in

some respects and may need improvement. Nor is there any problem combining worship with the idea that one's grasp of the object of worship may need to be modified to reflect our best grasp of the criteria for evaluating religions. Once we have the right criteria of evaluation, the object of worship is to be thought of as reflecting them. Indeed, in the case of a deity, the object of worship is to be thought of as endorsing these criteria, as well as giving expression to them, and as actually being worthy of worship partly on account of doing so. Correspondingly, a deity who is understood to favor or urge upon us forms of religion that are contrary to the proposed criteria would be one that is less worthy of worship or perhaps not worthy of worship at all.

Moreover, the expectation that we will exhibit attitudes such as curiosity, intellectual humility, and, in general, an awareness of ambiguity and its implications should not be compromised even in the very act of worship. This is so even at moments of religious exaltation, even when one has an inner tenderness and feels a spiritual sensitivity, even when religious participation is most intense in its fervor and most soaring in its devotion.

From these ruminations emerges another set of evaluative criteria. Just as traditions can be evaluated with respect to their willingness to incorporate new ethical discoveries, they can in turn be evaluated in terms of their willingness to face up to the implications of ambiguity and to incorporate the attitudes mentioned, which might even require some new practices or institutions.

There is the religion of innocence, in which little or nothing is known of other traditions and one's own path presents itself as the only viable path, the one that provides, too, the obviously correct account of how things are. Immersion in the teachings, scriptures, rituals, practices, and the like of one's own tradition is expected, as is unquestioning endorsement of its central tenets. Obliviousness and indifference—perhaps even hostility—to the values, practices, outlook, and so forth of other traditions are deemed appropriate. Characteristic, too, of the religion of innocence is an inability to grasp how an outsider can have a very good grasp of one's tradition and yet fail to endorse it.

On the other hand, there is the religion of experience, in which ambiguity and its significance are recognized, and in which we treat others with the seriousness they deserve. It is unrealistic to expect the innocent to conduct themselves as if they had experience, and it is both unrealistic and unwise to expect the experienced to carry on as if they were innocent.

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