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RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS*

GUY AXTELL

We now encounter what is known as religious pluralism, this being the name that has been given to the idea that the great world religions are different human responses to the same ultimate transcendent reality. That reality is in itself beyond the scope of our human conceptual systems. But nevertheless it is universally present as the very ground of our being. And in collaboration with the religious aspect of human nature it has produced both the personal and non-personal foci of religious worship and meditation—the gods and absolutes—which exist at the interface between the Real and the human mind.

—*John Hick, The Fifth Dimension:*
An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm

I. Introduction: Pluralism as a Middle-Path

Like many comparative philosophers of religion, I have much admired the work of John Hick, and in particular the importance he has attached to issues of religious diversity for philosophers, theologians, and the practicing adherents of the world's faith communities. Hick's far-reaching work has been studied by numerous scholars, including the contributors to Arvind Sharma's collection of essays (1993) on his life's work.[1] Like many of these authors, however, I find myself

troubled and somewhat discontent with the philosophical basis that Hick provides in the above passage and elsewhere, for the view he identifies as "religious pluralism."

In *The Fifth Dimension* (1999) and recent articles, Hick develops an argument that subtly qualifies and extends that of his most widely read work, *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989).[2] What he terms the "pluralist hypothesis" is presented as a middle-path among numerous responses to the recognition of religious diversity. For Hick, pluralism contrasts, on the one hand, with religious dogmatism, and in particular with the "exclusivist" view that only the religious teaching of one's own tradition is veridical, and/or only the religious faith or experience of one's own tradition is salvific. On the other hand, pluralism is also intended as a buttress against skepticism of the non-realist sort, the sort which denies truth value to religious statements.

But finding a theoretical basis for religious pluralism that can sustain it against both religious exclusivism and religious skepticism is no simple task. Exclusivism affirms what many people take as apparent, that claims about the nature of Godhead and salvation/liberation in various traditions are so different that they cannot possibly all be true. The exclusivist remains a realist about religious language, but responds to this strife of systems by rejecting as false all truth-claims incompatible with those of one's own creed. Pluralism, by contrast, sides with skepticism insofar as it takes the problem of religious diversity more seriously than does the religious exclusivist. The pluralist views this privileging of the cognitive claims of any one tradition to the detriment of all others as ethnocentric and intellectually ill-conceived. Practically speaking, pluralism supports tolerance, and beyond tolerance,

a genuine respect for differences between traditions and a willingness to learn; it perhaps implies even what Lee Yearley describes as a virtuous sense of "religious regret" at being unable to fully overcome being an outsider to the religious perspectives of other cultures.[3]

It is clear from this, however, that pluralism is a thesis of a normative or prescriptive character, not one intended as a descriptive account of how religious believers typically respond to the problem of conflicting systems of belief. According to Hick, "the pluralist hypothesis...[is] not itself a religious doctrine but a philosophical theory about the relation between the religions, and the status of their deities and absolutes..." (90). He accepts that a move to pluralism modifies more traditional understandings of religious knowledge and truth, and even suggests that its ability to *constrain* the view of religionists with respect to the problem of diversity should be seen as a virtue of this account. Yet Hick's "pluralistic hypothesis" still reflects a committed religious worldview, not a naturalistic one, and is marked as religious for just this reason :

The religious pluralism in question is an hypothesis about the relationship between the world's *religions*. It is a form of religious pluralism in that it is conceived from within the basic faith that religious experience is not *in toto* human imaginative projection but, whilst involving human conceptuality and imagination, is also a cognitive response to what [I]...generally prefer to speak of as the Real.[4]

This passage leads back to the point made earlier, that Hick sees religious pluralism as support against religious scepticism. His pluralist accepts that no religious tradition is privileged

with respect to religious truth or salvific efficacy, yet that each potentially expresses an "authentic response" to the impact of the Real upon us. But while arguing for an essential "parity" among the cognitive and salvific claims of various religions, Hick must resist opening the door too far in the direction of non-realism regarding religious experience and language. He does this by arguing for concurring elements in religious consciousness: "Each of the world religions has a dual concept of God [or Godhead] as both transcategorial in the ultimate divine nature and yet religiously available in virtue of qualities analogous to but limitlessly greater than our own."[5]

In drawing out the unifying significance of these concurrences over dual or "two-level" concepts, Hick makes further excursions into the philosophy of religious experience and language. He connects the pluralistic hypothesis to a "critical realist principle" mediating between naïve realist and non-realist accounts: "The critical realist principle [is] that there are realities external to us, but that we are never aware of them as they are in themselves, but always as they appear to us with our particular cognitive machinery and conceptual resources...." (1999, 41). Hick's critical realism is "a realism that takes full account of the perceiver's contribution to all human awareness" (1995, 420). It opposes naïve realism by holding that that the Real is never experienced directly, but always in ways that are historically-conditioned and limited by the mediation of language. It opposes skeptical non-realism by claiming an ultimate referent for a plurality of religious perceptions and conceptions: Their common object is what Hick, using a telling neo-Kantian phrase, calls the Real *an sich*. The "givenness" of a religious experience is the impact upon the human spirit of the Real *an sich*, and even though

the substantial content of that experience is supplied by one's own religious concepts and imagery, experiences which meet certain pragmatic criteria are affirmed as having been object-directed, a "response to" the Real.

Here, in brief, are the two steps of Hick's religious pluralism, and we can refine each of these in the next section. But it should be clear from this introduction that religious pluralism has many detractors or discontents. In this essay, I focus primarily on those who share many of Hick's basic commitments to religious pluralism but who find fault with the specific, neo-Kantian manner in which he supports it. In Section II I will briefly develop Hick's critical realist principle and its relationship to the pluralist hypothesis, and then review some criticisms raised by Ninian Smart and others. The primary goal is to frame a puzzle concerning our understanding of religious pluralism, and to show that neither Hick nor Smart provides a philosophically adequate account of it. The final section (III), outlines an alternative account, one that I argue is better able to address the key problems at issue in this 'internal' debate among self-described religious pluralists.

II. Hick's Onto-Theological Approach : A Flawed Basis for Pluralism

Let us being again with what we identified as the two steps involved in Hick's account. In the first step, Hick claims that viewing religious discourse as a response to a transcendent Real discloses a 'unity-in-difference' underlying the world's great religious traditions. Substantive characteristics cannot be attributed to the Real in itself, "the reality underlying and transcending everything." So apart from some few purely formal concepts, the Real is ineffable, or as Hick prefers to say, transcategorial—outside our spectrum of categories. As

for the second step, the various world religions "constitute different human responses to the ultimate transcendent reality to which they all, in their different ways, bear witness" (254).[6] Religious traditions always center upon the Real in relation to ourselves, and as humanly experienced in some particular form. Thus the metaphorical nature of religious language follows as a correlate of the transcategorial nature of the Real an sich. Modernizing and radicalizing Aquinas' claim that 'Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower,' Hick argues that "the ultimately Real can only enter our consciousness in the range of forms made possible by our own conceptual systems" (38).

The various God-figures and the various non-personal foci of religious meditation are, according to our big picture, different transformations of the impact upon us of the ultimately Real. But that reality, in itself beyond the range of conscious human experience, does not fit into the systems of concepts in terms of which we are able to think. It is what it is, but what it is cannot be described in human categories. We can only describe its 'impact' upon us, as this is filtered by our limited receptivity and translated in terms of our conceptual systems into one of the personal or non-personal 'objects' of religious experience.[7]

Hick supports the dual nature of his neo-Kantian metaphysic by appealing to significant concurring elements within the mystical sub-traditions of the great monotheisms. He then makes an analogous case for the religions of India and East Asia. Expressed through Shankara's distinction between *nirguna* and *saguna* Brahman, the former is without attributes, formless or ineffable, transcategorial, and lying outside our

human conceptual repertoire. *Saguna* Brahman is that same reality as humanly thought and experienced through specific and plural forms, such as those of personal deities or other forces understood as manifestations of the divine.[8] Although taken in its general form from Shankara, Hick believes that behind Sikh thought also, "there lies the pan-Indian distinction between God in God's self and God in relation to the creation."[9]

Here we might begin to question the neo-Kantian metaphysics that Hick identifies with religious pluralism. Purusottama Bilimoria and Ninian Smart are among those critics who argue that we can support a form of religious pluralism without invoking Hick's neo-Kantianism.[10] Why should we want to? Bilimoria finds fault with the pre-established harmony asserted to obtain between our own make-up and that of ultimate reality; he finds it a case of circular reasoning when Hick uses this harmony to attribute what is good and right in each religion to the action of the Real an *sich*.[11] Additionally, Bilimoria objects to forms of "radical pluralism" that insist on the necessity of an onto-theological grounding for religious language. For in adopting the Kantian language of Hick's critical realist principle we are inevitably exposed to the classical critiques of Kant's ding an sich. Is what Hick calls the "Real an sich" singular or plural? Is it a substantive entity (an *ens realissimum*) or is it as easily understood as process? In the early Buddhist perspective, for instance, the idea of an unchanging substance underlying changing manifestations is replaced by the ideas of an aggregate of constituent elements or streams of events. How can we then adopt Hick's language of substance as a unifying ground?

Hick's critics also allege that he fails to consistently adhere to his own prohibition against speaking substantially about the Real *an sich*, but rather smuggles substantial statements into his account by presenting them as "logically generated" or purely formal. If correct, this shows that Hick not only allows his own substantial theological opinions into the mix, but also, unacceptably, insulates them from scrutiny. Objections such as these have led Hick to revise his views somewhat over the years, in the direction of characterizing the Real *an sich* as a thinner and thinner concept, perhaps even, as some critics have suggested, to the point of redundancy.

The problem is not Hick's realism *per se*, since I agree that a genuine *religious* pluralism—as opposed to any secular humanist counterpart—remains committed to some form of it. Rather, the problem revolves around the sharp tension between what we have called his two steps—his *antirealist* account of religious language as embedded in and through culture, and his *realist* doctrine of the transcategorial Real existing independent of these linguistic practices.[12] Given the concessions Hick makes to the perceiver's contribution to the content of their religious experiences, is there yet something in that experience that Hick can show necessitates the positing of this noumenal remainder? If a philosophical defense falls short of demonstrating this, Hick's core commitment to realism is in danger being undercut. According to Smart as well, "We do not at all resolve the problem of the diversity of Foci by postulating a single Real. One cannot establish the identity of Focus A and Focus B on the basis of their both referring to a single Real; rather the claim that they both refer to the same Real is another way of affirming the identity, which has to be argued for on other grounds" (104).

We might codify some of these criticisms of Hick's neo-Kantian approach by putting them in the form of a dilemma: On the one hand, Hick must refrain from substantial statements about the Real *an sich* in order to remain consistent with his own primary theoretical distinction. But on the other hand, the very reasons Hick offers for accepting the postulation of this noumenal remainder imply that he must be able to say something substantial about it. For the Real *an sich* can be considered a good explanatory hypothesis only if we can posit substantial properties of it.[13]

As this dilemma helps us to see, part of the problem that other philosophers have with Hick's approach is the radical epistemic "rift" it implies, the rift between divergent experiences or phenomenal appearances and the unitary noumenal reality that is claimed to ground them. Even under Hick's preferred "dual aspect" reading of Kant, his transference of Kantian principles to religious experience tends to obscure any sense in which his hypothesis is genuinely explanatory. An X of which we can assert only that nothing can be said cannot fit any commonly accepted criteria for a good hypothesis; nor, therefore, is it commensurable enough with philosophic naturalism to stand in a relationship of competition over the explanation of the presence and the diversity of religious experience. Rather, it appears to re-invite the non-realism that Hick's religious pluralist hoped to overcome. For the mystical traditions he selectively draws from in order to support his pluralist hypothesis tend not only to acknowledge the equivocal nature of religious language, but also to celebrate it as a means of "protecting" the transcategorial status of the ultimately Real. Yet skeptical non-realism typically starts from the lack of univocal reference in religious language, and

concludes by denying any respectable *epistemic* grounds for religious belief.[14] In Ludwig Feuerbach's classical formulation of this perspective, "To deny all the qualities of a being is equivalent to denying that being itself...."[15]

For Smart, the upshot of the various objections to Hick's approach that we have outlined should be a rejection of his onto-theological starting point. Smart's alternative proposal is what we can call a "dialogical" (or as he prefers, an "eschatological") model; it simply states that religions can and should try to discover commonalities, in the hope of some form of "future convergence." Smart's model is based upon the potential fruitfulness of dialogue over religious belief, in any situation where there remains a *possibility* of future convergence. This replaces a "unity" determined a priori with a potential "complementarity" between religions to be determined by detailed comparison. Given that traditions have changed in the past, the contradictions that we find today "may evolve patterns which converge." Such a view would not understate the problem of religious diversity, as he thinks Hick's view allows. Smart also thinks that, pragmatically speaking, Hick's self-assured unity engenders an attitude of complacency, for subsuming another's object of discourse under one's own can be a subtle form of hegemony; his weaker dialogical account, he believes, better promotes a self-critical attitude and sincere cross-cultural dialogue.

Tellingly, Smart says that "while a single Real here and now may not be easy to establish, we might look towards a future Real" (187). While we here see his support for the theistic goal of syncretism between religions, this passage and others strongly suggest a social constructivist view of religious truth. If not paralleled in Smart's thinking about

truth in other aspects of life, this might easily be thought to be a subtle manner of relativizing the issue of religious truth, through the suggestion that what is real or true in this sphere is nothing more than a matter to be decided by community consensus. Though Smart refers to himself as a pluralist, his statement, his apparent constructivism would appear to impugn the realist commitment that Hick takes as essential to any religious pluralism worthy of the name.[16] Hick might be correct to regard it as a secular humanist substitute for the real article.

The point can be further emphasized by noting the political character of Smart's understanding of pluralism. For him it is simply "a liberal principle which needs to be built into all worldviews." It is a "global contract" of a politically liberal nature, in which all "worldviews" whether religious or not, are held "in forms which are mutually tolerable."[17] Of course it is common to use the term "pluralism" as Smart does simply to describe attitudes of tolerance and respect among peoples, both religious and secular. But in this case the attitudes seem to exhaust the matter, and there remains no distinctive hypothesis regarding the relationship between the world's religions in regard, specifically, to their divergent systems of belief. Thus writing directly in response to Smart, Hick objects that Smarts approach to pluralism "obliterate(s) this fundamental distinction between transcendental and naturalistic beliefs."[18]

Beyond the sharp contrast of philosophical styles (between a neo-Kantian and an empiricist), the substantive differences between Hick and Smart over the make-up of a viable pluralistic hypothesis now come into view. For Hick the cost for accepting Smart's dialogical proposal would be too great, for Smart rejects the need for any *unity-in-difference* thesis when he rejects Hick's critical realism. Although beyond the

grasp of discursive language, the Real an sich performs a number of crucial unifying functions in Hick's account. It provides for the distinctiveness of the pluralism he described as *religious* precisely because it is "conceived from within the basic faith that religious experience is not *in toto* human imaginative projection." Smart's dialogical account is too weak to support this basic conviction as more than mere hope, but for Hick it is one of the "basic elements of the pluralist hypothesis" (96).

In order to codify the concerns we have raised about the conditions on an adequate philosophical understanding of religious pluralism, I would offer the following formula: What Smart wants of Hick is a profound *respect for difference* in our conceptions of ultimate reality, in order to resist any uncritical imposition of a common object of worship; but what Hick wants of Smart is a *unity-in-difference* thesis, in order to anchor a realist construal of religious language, keeping it safe from its threatened drift into skepticism. The puzzle that I have set before you using Hick and Smart as stalking-horses must be acknowledged as deeply troubling if we accept two things: 1) That both of their demands are legitimate, and indeed incumbent upon the religious pluralist; and 2) That neither one of their positions has the resources to satisfy both of these demands. The final section of this paper will outline a substantially different account to satisfy these twin demands.

III. Utilizing Lakatos's Methodology: Holism and the Rationality of Theory-Choice

The alternative approach that I will here briefly develop accords with Smart's rejection of Hick's neo-Kantian

assumptions: religious pluralism need not be identified with an *a priori* bifurcation between noumenal and phenomenal reality.[19] My difference with Hick is partly summarized by saying that pluralism should be understood as an *epistemological* or *doxastic* position concerning the rationality of belief, rather than as a metaphysical claim. This approach draws initially from the thought of William James, who supported pluralism in the sense of an intellectual 'right' to believe, a spirit of speculative or mental freedom that goes beyond mere political tolerance. James concluded his most influential lecture, "The Will to Believe," with a petition to "delicately and profoundly to respect one another's mental freedom"; "Then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless."

We therefore begin with a division of labor which Hick has largely collapsed: Pluralism, as an epistemic notion, is differentiated from the *unity-in-difference* thesis that serves as a cognitive anchor for religious belief. In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James sought for unity in the form of an empirically-based statement of the common beliefs of the world's religious faithful, a statement James referred to as "the religious hypothesis." He attempted to set aside the local in order to state the religious hypothesis in the form of a universal core of religious belief, "broad and generic" enough to be neutral as between theistic and non-theistic conceptions of Godhead. Such a claim would need to be more generic than an existence claim (i.e., 'God exists,' etc.), of course, for the simple reason we started with, that many of the world's religions have a non-personal focus of religious faith and meditation.[20] While this approach has often been criticized, I believe that James could have circumvented its problems

through a more studious delineation of the differences between assent to a generic "religious hypothesis," and commitment to a particular tradition or creed. In order to show this, however, we will seek to update our broadly Jamesian approach by relating it to methodological issues in the philosophy of science, issues that have reshaped the image of scientific reasoning and theory-choice in the post-positivist era.

To accommodate differences among belief and multiple levels of cognitive assent, our alternative account may draw upon parallels with the mode of justification that is exhibited in the sciences. Indeed it is modeled in significant ways upon Imre Lakatos's "methodology of scientific research programmes" (hereafter MSRP). For reasons we will discuss further below, Lakatos's MSRP has helped to reshape discussions of justification and theory choice in science. The Lakatosian model is based upon the idea of competing "research programs," which are constituted by a central "hard core" thesis that remains largely insulated from direct empirical falsification by an "outer belt" of auxiliary assumptions, some empirical and some methodological. The proponents of any given program, say for instance, neo-Darwinism, would typically surrender this core belief or hypothesis only as an option of last resort. More specifically, the capitulation of a "core" belief occurs because the secondary assumptions that constitute its supporting outer belt can no longer be reconciled with the facts of experience, and so fails in their function to protect the hard core.

Several philosophers have attempted to show how Lakatos's methodology might be applicable to religion as well at to science. In his Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism (1982), Gary Gutting suggests that religious theologies may

be usefully regarded on analogy with MSRP, in the sense that "The separation of a core of belief from the outer belt of overbelief provides the basis for a rehabilitation of the cognitive claims of religion."[21]

There is first what we might call a 'core' of belief to which decisive assent is given. Such assent should not be given to any substantive account of the details of God's nature and his relations with us (such as those offered by the creeds and theologies of religions), but only to the reality of a superhuman power and love in our lives…Second, there is an 'outer belt' of belief …to which only interim assent is appropriate. Here are included almost all the content of the creeds and theologies that express the distinctive commitments of specific religions…The core of religious faith has only a very minimal propositional content, and consists primarily of living with an awareness of and an openness to the power and goodness of a divinity that remains essentially mysterious to us. The greatest cognitive failure of religions throughout history has been their confusion, due to fundamental self-misunderstanding, of the core and the outer belt of their commitment.

While Gutting's use of MSRP is largely limited to the value of distinguishing degrees of cognitive assent, Nancey Murphy, in her Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning (1993), uses MSRP more aggressively. In her chapter "Scientific Theology," she advocates a deliberate adoption of Lakatos's methodology in theology, and asserts that specific twentieth-century "research program theologies" within her Catholic tradition emerge as competitors to scientific naturalism. On my view, Murphy exaggerates parallels between science and

theology, and this leads her to a competition model of the relationship between science and religion which Gutting and Hefner (1993) were correct in rejecting. I find Murphy's attempt to render "research program theologies" as competitors of scientific programs overbold, for like critics such as N. H. Gregerson I can make little practical sense of her claims that theologies are able to "predict novel facts" or vie against scientific theories to exhibit comparatively greater "empirical progress."22

Despite my dissent from Murphy conceptions of scientific theology, her utilization of MSRP remains valuable for its keen insights on the developments that led Lakatos to the moderate epistemological holism that informs his methodology. For she is quite correct that this holism pertains to contexts of theory-choice that extend beyond science. Holism helps us to explain why broad, comprehensive theories are highly resistant to falsification, and indeed why it is beneficial to the scientific discovery that this is so. According to Pierre Duhem (1914), the scientist "never subject(s) an isolated hypothesis to experimental test, but only a whole group of hypotheses." Lakatos accepted this insight, along with its implications that logic cannot strictly dictate what changes to make within one's web of beliefs when objections and anomalies accrue.

Epistemological holism has changed what it means to supply evidence for a hypothesis, and, through its rejection of naïve falsificationism, brings with it a more positive understanding of the role of tenacity in the pursuit of a research program. For as both Kuhn and Lakatos have vividly pointed out, there is a far greater value to "commitment" within science than older, Popperian and positivist models assumed. Lakatos rejected the kind of 'instant rationality' that he still found in Sir Karl Popper's

falsificationist logic focused around isolated hypotheses: "...The continuity in science, the tenacity of some theories, the rationality of a certain amount of dogmatism, can only be explained if we construe science as a battleground of research programmes rather than of isolated theories" (87). As changes are made anywhere in one's web of belief, one's new program is not identical to its predecessors, and Lakatos bids us to look at research programs as historical successions over time.

It is a deliberate methodological decision on the part of a scientist to treat the 'hard core' of her programme, after certain initial successes, as 'irrefutable.' Lakatos referred to this hard core as a "metaphysical" claim in just this sense, though I would prefer to put this point in the less awkward way that J.W. van Huyssteen (1989) puts it when he writes, "These research traditions and broader worldviews are mostly tacitly assumed, are rarely produced through rational reflection alone, and reveal that scientific reflection—like theological reflection—is a very specific cultural and human phenomenon."23

This suggests possibilities for a rapprochement between science and theology on issues regarding the rationality of belief. According to Murphy, "holism must be viewed as of a piece with other changes in both theology and philosophy of science" (18), including that the new image of science is one in which rational disagreement is a pervasive feature. She thus attempts to utilize the common standards of MSRP without presupposing an absolute conception of rationality, and without doing violence to the internal logic of diverse theistic traditions. Murphy's epistemological holism suggests that a least some religious believers and traditions conform to norms of reasoning common to all kinds of science. Holding this as a

normative stance, she does not intend a blanket defense of the rationality of religious belief. But for believers or traditions that accept such a rational reconstruction of their systems of belief, it suggests a powerful defense.

Still, neither Gutting's nor Murphy's use of MSRP is tied into a philosophical defense of religious pluralism. Both, indeed, are interested in defending a specifically theistic conception of Godhead, and in this sense would most likely be construed an inclusivists rather than pluralists with the cross-cultural orientation of Hick and Smart. What I am suggesting is that Lakatos's holistic model of justification can nevertheless most naturally be construed as supporting pluralism. In this case, shared assent to a common "core" religious hypothesis represents the unity-in-difference thesis that we saw Hick insist upon as a cognitive anchor for religious language. This is no less the case for commitment to the naturalistic hypothesis as a competing global worldview. At the same time, at the level Lakatos refers to as the protective belt of a program, each religion pursues its own way of life according to its culturally-specific traditions. As each of these also represents its own research program distinct from one another, the model allows for overlapping programs, as does Lakatos's. This reinforces the *profound respect for difference* in our conceptions of ultimate reality that Smart insisted upon.

The Lakatosian model may be adapted to the issues at hand by distinguishing between what I will call *living experiments* and *experiments in living*.[24] These are distinct but intricately inter-related types of commitments. The former, *living experiments*, represent an individual's assent either to the naturalistic hypothesis or to the religious hypothesis, these being defined as mutually exclusive. The latter, *experiments in living*,

represent the kinds of cognitive commitments and communal affiliations that a person might have as a practicing adherent within a particular religious tradition. These commitments include non-historical claims regarding conceptions of godhead (theism, deism, pantheism, panentheism, etc.), of faith, of an eschatological goal or end-state, as well as historical claims made in relation to a tradition of revelation or sacred history. But lest we neglect the obvious fact that religious consciousness involves far more than a set of cognitive claims, we must be quick to include within an *experiment in living* the ritual, emotional, narrative and ethical commitments that are also aspects of religious life within a particular community.

Science and religion are terms for institutions, not worldviews. For this reason it is the contrast of naturalism and non-naturalism (the religious hypothesis) that we want to specify as alternative comprehensive worldviews. By doing otherwise we would be begging the most pertinent questions, including those of the form and necessity of science's commitment to naturalism. On our model this remains an open question. Just as epistemological holism shows that comprehensive or broadly explanatory theories cannot be easily falsified, it also shows that their rational acceptance can only be comparative and not absolute. The range of considerations involved in comparing one such comprehensive worldview with another is broad, and while shared epistemic values constrain our choices, the rationality of choice cannot be reduced to a formulaic expression. The most that one can expect is that the hypotheses we pursue continue to provide a better explanation of our total experience than its best alternatives, and be maintained without recourse to fallacious forms of *ad hoc* reasoning.

Gutting and Murphy each utilize the Lakatosian model to frame a theistic research program, whose hard core contains reference to the existence of a personal creator-god active in human history. James wrote that it is natural enough for religious believers to fill out and elaborate the religious hypothesis in a manner that represents a "live" option for them; but I agree with James that the statement of the hypothesis itself should remain as neutral as possible with respect to alternative conceptions of Godhead. While James sometimes fell into ambiguity on this score, by conflating *the religious hypothesis* with plural religious *hypotheses*, there are instances where it is apparent that he found value in the sharper distinction of levels that we have tried to draw out by appeal to the Lakatosian model. His classic lecture, "The Will to Believe" largely overlooked this distinction of levels, since it focused around a defense of the rationality of what we have called alternative *living experiments*, specifically, the generic religious hypothesis defined in contrast with a naturalistic hypothesis that excludes it. But in the Preface for the 1896 edition, James acknowledged such a distinction of levels by suggesting a Darwinian setting for what we have called experiments in living: "Meanwhile the freest competition of the various faiths with one another, and their openest application to life by their several champions, are the most favorable conditions under which the survival of the fittest can proceed" (xii).

James's account is thus invested with a keen sense of competition and elimination, not unlike Lakatos's methodology for the evaluation of scientific theories. This bears comparison with the parity asserted in Hick's account of religious pluralism, and defended by the claim that all forms of religious discourse

intend a common object. James' stronger acknowledgment of competition, and with it, of the potential failure of our experiments in living to provide the pragmatic goods we originally sought in them, remain important lessons that even a pluralistic account must heed; only by acknowledging these lessons do we leave substantial room for recognizing our intellectual responsibility in responding to objections and in pursuing further evidence, responsibilities from which James did not exempt religious consciousness. Pluralism, based closely on learning from other cultures, is not relativism, and does not imply that all experiments in living are equally successful, either pragmatically or cognitively. But it does stand against the view that there must be one uniquely correct religious experiment in living. This is no more necessary than that there needs to be, on the Lakatosian methodology, a single rational or correct way of aligning auxiliary assumptions in support of a research program's hard core.

Each existing religious tradition constitutes its own *experiment in living*, and in this extended sense, its own unique 'program.' But these differences are also tempered and qualified, on our model as on James's, by their being united on the deeper level of the religious hypothesis, the core claim of which they each defend. In turn, our contrast of the religious hypothesis with the naturalistic hypothesis, as embodying contrary core claims and motivating divergent *living experiments*, means that there are even comparative judgments that can be made between such "total" or "global" worldviews. Is there a preponderance of evidence that the living experiment of the naturalist is a success, and that of the religionist a failure? We remain consistent in regarding truth and rationality at this level as also an "open question." Skeptics, to be sure,

may accept our model extending MSRP, just in order to argue that the religious hypothesis constitutes what Lakatos called a "degenerating" research program. What must be resisted is not this style of argument, which is legitimate so long as we do not confuse these deep theories with those more directly adjudicated by empirical fact; what must be resisted, rather, is the common, illegitimate assumption that the religious hypothesis has a special burden of proof not shared by the naturalistic hypothesis. On the contrary, staying true to our model of MSRP suggests that assent to the "core" claims of the naturalistic worldview is not a dictate of rationality, but rather the adoption of yet another *living experiment* underdetermined by reason and evidence.

In conclusion, I have maintained that 1) religious diversity poses a quite serious challenge to religious belief; 2) the best philosophical defense that can be made on behalf of religious belief is a pluralistic one; and 3) Lakatos's MSRP provides a more useful key to modeling such a pluralistic account of the relationship between the world's religions than that offered by either John Hick's critical realism or Ninian Smart's constructivist non-realism. Despite this alternative, more epistemologically-oriented approach to defending religious pluralism, the practical upshot of Hick's account is largely maintained: Our Lakatosian model also results in a prescription for "thinner theologies" with greater circumspection over faith-based beliefs, and a willingness to re-interpret traditional teachings in light of the findings of modern science.

It is typical in popular religious belief, as well as in those forms of systematic theology that exhibit an exclusivist orientation, to resist what Gutting called the "rehabilitation" of the cognitive claims of religion: They *invert* the Lakatosian

model by making the teachings of their own tradition the object of strong assent, while ignoring both differences and convergences between traditions. These strategems however, make it difficult to make sense of the idea of learning from other cultures, and inevitably lead to unnecessary conflict between reason and faith. Our religious pluralist will distinguish, in line with Gutting's prescription, the responsible believer's *interim* assent to specific teachings of a culturally-situated wisdom tradition, from their decisive assent to the religious hypothesis. As this is stated on analogy with Lakatos's MSRP, the protective belt, being more directly exposed to empirical problems and potential refutation, "is constantly modified, increased, complicated, while the hard core remains intact" (Lakatos 179).

UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA

NOTES

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the international conference on "Language, Thought and Reality: East-West Perspectives," sponsored by Society of Indian Philosophy and Religion in Chico, California, 2001.

1. *God, Truth and Reality*: Essays in Honour of John Hick, Arvind Sharma, ed. St. Martin's Press, 1993.

2. John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*, Oxford, U.K.: Oneworld Publications, 1999. All undated page references in this paper are to this work. See also his earlier *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989.

3. Lee A. Yearly, *New Religious Virtues and the Study of Religion*. Phoenix, AZ: Arisona State University, 1994. See also his

"Recent Work on Virtue" *Religious Studies Review* 16, no. 1, 1990: 1-9.

4. Hick,"Religious Pluralism and the Divine: A Response to Paul Eddy," Rel. Stud.31 (1995), pp. 417-420, p. 417. See also Paul Eddy, "Religious Pluralism and the Divine: Another Look at John Hick's Neo-Kantian Proposal" in *Rel. Stud.* 30 (1994), pp. 467-478.

5. Hick. "Ineffability," *Rel. Stud.* 36, 35-46, p. 36.

6. Smart points to the contingency in Hick's account of plural traditions,commenting that this "means that we are a long way from Kant," who thought of the filtering processes not in cultural terms, but in terms of a priori schemata. Hence I follow Smart in referring to Hick's account as "neo-Kantian." Ninian Smart, "A Contemplation of Absolutes," in Sharma (ed.) 1993, p.184-5. Reprinted in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, Philip Quinn and Kevin Meeker, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 99-108.

7. Hick 1999, 40.

8. Within the Trikaya doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism, the Dharmakaya ('dharma body') and the Sambhogakaya ('body of bliss') are thought by Hick to reflect an analogous distinction. Throughout Mahayana, he holds, ultimate reality is emptiness, formless, transcategorial.

9. Ibid., 94: "In more specifically Sikh terms, 'Nirankar or Ekam-kar is the... Transcendent and Absolute, whilst Omkar is the ground of the Creation."

10. Ninian Smart, in Sharma (ed.) 1993, 186. Smart rightly points out that "we shouldn't be using either the singular or the plural of thatwhich is noumenal."

11. See Purusottama Bilimoria, "A Problem for Radical Pluralism," in Gary E. Kessler, ed., *Philosophy of Religion: Toward a Global Perspective*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999: 573-81.

12. Sumner Twiss, "The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism: A Critical Appraisal of Hick and His Critics," in P. Quinn and K. Meeker, eds., 2000: 67-98.

13. Earlier versions of the dilemma can be found in Eddy (1994) and in Christopher J. Insole, "Why John Hick cannot, and should not, stay out of the jam pot", Rel. Stud. 36, 25-33 (2000).

14. Consider the relationship between positive (cataphatic) and negative (apophatic) theology, and the claims made on behalf of mystical traditions that, by mutually canceling out, these forms of theology point beyond themselves "to the truly ineffable." On the classical debate over "univocal" and "equivocal" views of religious language, see Dan R. Stiver's useful book *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol, & Story*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996. References to Aquinas passages are *The Summa Theological of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 1952, Chicago IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1.1.9 & 1.13.2.

15. See Eddy, 47 for a fuller development.

16. For Hick's "committed" views on this, see his "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," in P. Quinn and K. Meeker, eds., 2000: 54-66.

17. Smart, "Pluralism, Religions, and the Virtues of Uncertainty," in Hick, Smart and Burrell (eds.), *Hermeneutics, Religious Pluralism, and Truth*. Wake Forest University Press, 1987.

18. Hick, "Responses," in Hick, Smart and Burrell (eds.), 56.

19. I agree with Philip Hefner who, speaking of critical realism as used by authors such as Ian Barbour and Arthur Peacocke, writes that "I *may believe* that mythic language meets the criteria of critical realism," but this is "more a hope than a conclusive argument." With not only the pluralist hypothesis (explicitly) but now also the critical realist principle (implicitly) being revealed as faith-based, it should be clear

that the one cannot provide the independent support for the other that Hick envisions. See Phillip Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture and Religion*. Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 1993, 220.

20. One of James's attempts at a religious hypothesis offered: "that the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance; that union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end" and that life can be transformed for the better by making proper contact with it. From *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1985 (1902).

21. Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*. West Bend, In.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982, 175-177. See also Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*. Cambridge, Ma.: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Louis Pojman also makes use of Lakatos's model in *Religious Belief and the Will*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986.

22. Niels Henrik Gregersen, "A Contextual Coherence Theory for the Science-Theology Dialogue," in Gregersen and Huyssteen (eds.), *Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the Current Dialogue*. Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998. See also Philip Hefner, 1993.

23. Huyssteen from Gregersen and Huyssteen, (eds.), 1998, p. 25.

24. See Guy Axtell, "Courage, Caution, and Heaven's Gate," in *Proceedings of the 20th World Congress of Philosophy, Vol. 5: Philosophies of Religion, Art, and Creativity*, 77-89. Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999.

OUR FRUITFUL EARTH BUDDHIST VALUES FOR MODERATION IN PROCREATION

MICHAEL STOLTZFUS

ABSTRACT

Buddhist values emerge from a vision of interdependence, nonattachment, and moderation in all pursuits. This article is a reflection on these traditional Buddhist teachings within the context of the current crisis of overpopulation and environmental degradation. I highlight the implied link (present in many religious traditions), between spiritual piety and the production of progeny, and the Buddhist rejection of this link is investigated. More importantly, the Buddhist values that encourage moderation and responsibility regarding procreation are highlighted. Buddhism does not suggest that people should 'go forth and multiply,' just as it does not view humans a special creation by 'God' and therefore given 'dominion' over the natural world.

I. Introduction

Few religions advocate limiting human fertility. Indeed, many religious traditions encourage or require their members to reproduce, without providing any guidance about limits and without much recognition that overpopulation can cause great