

## PLURALISM WITH A PROVISIO

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It is, I think, clear to most of us that, if we are to study religions in an unbiased manner, then we must adopt a pluralistic approach such as Dianna Eck speaks about. But for those of us who are concerned with its philosophical implications, such an approach has unsettling consequences. It would seem to be accompanied inevitably by a metaphysical relativism that undermines religious absolutes and the authority of religions in metaphysical matters.

This paper addresses that problem. It proposes a way to modify pluralism that preserves the pluralistic approach to metaphysical differences and, at the same time, provides for metaphysical absolutes. While these two ends appear contradictory, there is ample evidence of a way to reconcile them.

First, I will explain the problem. Then I will tell a story from the history of science that I think shows a way out of this problem.

The philosophical problem with pluralism stems from its approach to religious diversity. This diversity has a metaphysical component, namely, that accounts given by different religions of reality and the cosmos do not, on the face of it, seem compatible with each other. Christians believe in God; Buddhists and many others do not. Buddhists believe in the void nature of reality; Christians do not. Nondual Hindus believe that humans and God are of the same substance; most Buddhists and Christians do not. Complicating these metaphysical matters even further are other secular philosophies such as, say, materialism, physicalism, and naturalism.

Pluralism offers a way to embrace and understand such differences. It presses us to honor each metaphysical view as it is, without prejudice. It locates barriers to interreligious understanding in “exclusivist” and “inclusivist” worldviews — views that, in the former case, see one’s own beliefs as right and other beliefs as wrong, and, in the latter case, paper over religious differences by seeing other beliefs as just variations of one’s own. To paraphrase Eck, pluralism honors differences; it lives in the relationships among religions. It accepts not one “universalism” but rather a plurality of “universalisms.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Human Rights at Harvard: Interdisciplinary Faculty Perspectives on The Human Rights Movement*. Second Symposium Held at Harvard University on April 5, 1997, Harvard University: University Committee on Human Rights Studies, 1999, 7ff.

Although pluralism may offer a method for helping us to understand better our religious differences, in its present form it does not help us toward a philosophical resolution of these differences. It leaves us with no criteria to judge true from false, right from wrong, and good from bad across cultures and worldviews. One interpretation of a text or of a historical event becomes as valid as any other. God is no longer the Creator God of our universe but rather becomes the created god of a certain culture and history. Perhaps most disturbing, one worldview becomes as good as any other, and all ideologies no matter how dehumanizing or horrific may claim equal authority. If we ground our philosophy on pluralism alone, by what authority might we, for example, question Nazism or the Ku Klux Klan or Al Qaeda's version of Islam? Indeed, pluralism without some sort of amendment would seem to do away with all pancultural, religious authority.

Huston Smith, who is critical of Eck in this regard, addresses this issue in his book, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*.<sup>2</sup> He argues that by eschewing the metaphysical certainty of religious authorities, one undermines metaphysics altogether. He writes that "In different ways, the East and the West are going through a single common crisis whose cause is the spiritual condition of the modern world. That condition is characterized by loss — the loss of religious certainties and of transcendence with its larger horizons."<sup>3</sup> Smith speaks of the "demise of metaphysics" — the effort of contemporary science and philosophy to "manufacture a metaphysics-less world." Such an idea is, as he observes, "an oxymoron if there ever was one."<sup>4</sup> Metaphysics does not go away simply by willing it to do so. Whether we like it or not, in order to live in the larger world, we are bound to determine, as best we can, what holds true not just for oneself or a certain group of people, but for all of us. We need secure, metaphysical homes for ourselves, but we cannot build such homes on the shifting sands of pluralism's philosophical relativism.

In addition to this metaphysical difficulty, pluralism's epistemology is also troublesome. Its way of seeking truth contradicts that of most religions. Although pluralism provides a way to embrace religious diversity intellectually, the subtext of its approach is that the truths we seek in the study of religion are not to be gained from the authority of a religion's own teaching. They are gained rather through a bracketing of that authority coupled with a refocusing on relationships and differences. This is not to say that this is necessarily the wrong approach.

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<sup>2</sup> Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*, New York: HarperCollins, 2001. See also Peggy Lim, "Divinity and Distinction," at <http://hcs.harvard.edu/~dnd/pages/archives/1999/February/eck.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Why Religion Matters*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Why Religion Matters*, 49.

Rather, latent in pluralism is an epistemological agenda — a notion not only of how we are to arrive best at knowledge about religion, but also, by implication, a notion of what knowledge means in the case of religion. I, like Eck, and I expect most of you, believe that this pluralistic approach or something like it is perhaps the only way to arrive at a genuine understanding of other religious views. But I also think it is important to acknowledge that some of the strong sentiment expressed by certain religious groups against pluralism has a valid source. Pluralism, regardless of intention, currently presents itself to many as a threatening, quasi-religious rival view of the cosmos claiming itself to be the best way to achieve a higher truth about religion.<sup>5</sup>

In saying this, I don't believe for a moment that any of this is lost on Eck. Clearly, she would have us arrive at our own understanding of ultimate issues based on what we learn in an unbiased approach to religious diversity. She speaks of “universalisms” in the plural, which implies an individual's or group's best effort to arrive at some sort of pancultural metaphysical understanding. In a conference on ethics in which Eck was a panelist, the anthropologist, David Maybury-Lewis pointed out that “among anthropologists ... relativism is treated as a procedural matter, not as an absolute. ... The reluctance to make immediate judgments is not the same as avoiding judgments altogether.”<sup>6</sup>

But such a comment only begs the question of how we are to find this philosophical common ground in the face of apparently incommensurable metaphysical views. Eck's pluralism in its present form appears to offer no way out of this philosophical logjam. Huston Smith is perhaps more helpful in this regard, but, in his presentation of it, his perennialist philosophy looks suspiciously like an inclusivist approach to the problem.

So how do we break the logjam? At least part of the answer lies within the kind of metaphysical mystery that pluralism has presented to us.

To begin with, I want to clarify two features of the problem in order to separate what we are concerned with from what we are not.

First, what is at issue are legitimate, metaphysical contradictions. Religions may spar over historical fact or the spiritual authority of certain individuals or texts or how texts are to be interpreted or even political borders, but such cultural and other differences are not the sort of conflicts at issue here. Religions may also spar over perceived differences arising from failures of communication or translation or in intellectual naïveté, but that is also not the problem here. Granted, we need to examine, for example, how words we translate as “truth” are not univocal, or how we might distinguish intellectual naïveté from intuitive genius, but enough of this

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., “Twisting Truth Through Classroom Consensus: Using the Bible to promote inter-faith ‘dialog’ and ‘common ground’ in public schools,” <http://www.crossroad.to/Quotes/FreedomForum.html>.

<sup>6</sup> *Human Rights at Harvard*, 13.

groundwork has already been done to let us know that what is at issue are viable, intellectually sound philosophical alternatives. We have a problem because we are caught on the horns of genuine dilemmas — mysteries that permit a variety of equally viable explanations. Differences between notions of God in Christianity and Brahman in Hinduism and Dao in Daoism and the absence of self and God in Buddhism would be of no significant intellectual note if they were not different, valid ways of accounting for the same data in regard to the same metaphysical interests.

The second feature of this philosophical problem is one that I want to dwell on in more detail. Specifically, this problem is not of the kind that can be solved by science as we know it today. Science may offer the best method for finding pancultural, universal truths. Nevertheless, by itself in its present form, it has at least two major limitations when used as the final arbiter for the nature of reality.

First, the province of empirical science does not include an understanding of its own presuppositions; for this, we must turn to philosophy. The methodology of empirical science involves assumptions about the nature of truth and the means to achieve it that cannot themselves be investigated by empirical science. Science uses logic to sift through the data of experience to find universals. But two central questions that have vexed Western philosophy from Plato to today have been the bases for logic and the nature of universals. In other words, the natures of the logic and of the universality that ground empirical science lie outside the domain of investigation for empirical science. They are instead the province of philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the reality given by science is inherently incomplete. The concern of science is universal truths; the particular as ultimately particular lies outside its scope.

This is an important but somewhat subtle aspect of science that is often overlooked. But it is subtle only because it concerns the limits of reason, and these are limits we all encounter regularly. We see them, for example, when we try to explain to another a particularly special experience we have had — a dance performance, for example, or a spiritual experience. In science, a written account — a formula, for example — conveys the entirety of the knowledge of interest. If you know the math and what the math refers to, then you have gained the knowledge of interest. But no account of a dance performance or a spiritual experience can convey the entirety of the knowledge of interest in these cases. One has to be there. The knowledge does not lie in what might be abstracted from a number of experiences but rather in the existential encounter itself.

The point is that the very process of reducing an event to its universal characteristics eliminates all that is strictly particular about that experience. The smell of a flower as actually

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<sup>7</sup> Edmund Husserl makes this point, as do many others. For Husserl's argument, see Edmond Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. Boyce Gibson, New York: Collier Books, 1962, 8-9 [20a].

experienced becomes the smell of a flower as analyzed. A real, embodied person becomes a name and a set of characteristics. A rose or a rainbow or a unicorn becomes its dictionary definition and loses whatever mystery and magic it might have for us in our actual lives.

In our efforts to come to grips with the metaphysical concerns of religions, reality's roots in the serendipity and secret potency of direct, lived experience are at least as important as its roots in the universals we approach through science. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam struggled and still struggle over how to characterize a Deity that often makes itself known most vividly in the most intimate of experiential encounters. In Buddhism, the bare, nonconceptual particular plays an important role in its philosophy where the objects of our everyday experience are characterized by *anicca*, impermanence, and not by enduring substances or qualities. In contemporary Western philosophy, much of the appeal of postmodern insights comes from its emphasis on the individual and the mystery of presence. Jacques Derrida's deconstruction projects, for example, rely on the fact that we cannot capture the existential here-and-now. It always escapes our reason and leaves us with metaphysical foundations that are inherently incomplete in some respect.<sup>8</sup> Others before Derrida, like David Hume, Emmanuel Kant, Bertrand Russell, and Charles Sanders Peirce, have noted that existence in itself — existence as lived and not as a concept — cannot be a meaningful logical predicate.<sup>9</sup> We can talk *about* existence, but existence talked about must always be existence as a concept, not existence as existence in itself. Even this phrase “existence-as-existence-in-itself” does not work; I cannot write the phrase or speak it without it becoming “existence-as-existence-in-itself-*as-concept*.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 2nd. ed. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press., 1993: p. 37. See also Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. By Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982: 6.

<sup>9</sup> For a summary of Kant's and Russell's arguments, see John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983: 18-19. For David Hume, see David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Sec vii.. Peirce writes that: "The act of *attention* [i.e., awareness of presence] has no connotation at all [i.e., no publicity] but is the pure denotative power of the mind" (James Hoopes, ed., *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991: 24).

<sup>10</sup> This problem can be characterized in other ways as well. William James speaks of it as a difference between the objective and subjective aspects of experience. To overlook the subjective aspect is like mistaking the menu for the real meal (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: Collier Books, 1961: pp. 386ff). Alfred North Whitehead speaks of this problem as a difference between abstract and concrete parts of empirical phenomena. He claims that when this limitation of science is overlooked, it results in at least what he calls the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness." Whitehead writes:

This fallacy consists in neglecting the degree of abstraction involved when an . . . [empirical phenomenon] is considered merely so far as it exemplifies certain categories of thought. There are aspects of actualities which are simply ignored so long as we restrict thought to these categories. Thus the success of a philosophy is to be measured by its comparative avoidance of this fallacy, when thought is restricted within its categories. (Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Ed. By David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, New York: Free Press, 1978: 7-8.)

In sum, religious pluralism confronts us with a philosophical problem beyond the ken of science. To resolve it, we must turn to philosophy and religion. But it is the conflicting, equally valid metaphysical alternatives of philosophy and religion that are the source of the problem.

Given this characterization of the problem, I want to turn next to a story from science. While science by itself cannot solve our philosophical difficulty, I think that its recent history does give us an important clue as to how we might break the logjam. The illustration I am referring to here is the historical debate in physics over whether light was corpuscular or wavelike in nature.

As I give this account, note its similarity to the present problem. In both cases, equally coherent accounts clearly contradict each other. But particularly note how the matter is resolved. Even though the options dramatically contradict each other, *both accounts prove to be largely correct*. Moreover, *both accounts are necessary to a full understanding of the subject at hand*.

The earliest scientific theories of the nature of light were proposed by Christian Huygens and Sir Isaac Newton. In 1690, Huygens proposed that light be explained as a wave. Newton, who had earlier discovered the visible spectrum, proposed in 1704 that light was made of small particles or “corpuscles.” Without adequate evidence to settle the dispute, Newton's prestige won his version greater favor for a century.

Then in the early 1800s experimental evidence started coming in favoring the wave theory. Experiments with diffraction and interference patterns of light and the polarization of light could only be explained with the wave theory. Later on in 1864, James Clerk Maxwell's electro-magnetic account of light and the experimental confirmation of that theory by Heinrich Hertz in 1886 gave the wave theory even more support.

But the wave theory failed to explain certain phenomena such as the photoelectric effect that demanded that light be corpuscular in nature. It was Albert Einstein's solution in 1905 that resolved the dispute by suggesting that light and other forms of electromagnetic radiation were waves made up of tiny bundles or “quanta” of energy called “photons.”

Light, it turned out, could not be characterized as wave alone or particle alone. Light presented itself empirically as both wave and particle — a peculiar unity that could not be explained by conventional conceptions of material reality.

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According to Whitehead, ignorance of this third limitation of science and the fallacy thus spawned has had an especially pernicious effect on our modern understanding of reality. Whitehead sees in this fallacy the source of the mind-matter problem. He claims that “modern philosophy has been ruined” by neglect of this fallacy and by the subsequent splintering of philosophy into opposing positions according to how each position purports to resolve the mind-matter problem. (Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, New York: Free Press, 1953, 51-55.)

Note that this resolution did not remove the distinction between wave and particle from the standpoint of conventional, everyday reason and experience. To the contrary, it implied that light, as well as all matter, regardless of what it might be in itself, was paradoxically *both* particle *and* wave in its appearance to us. Under some circumstances, matter was wavelike; under other circumstances, it was particle-like.

In fact, two very different pictures of matter have emerged in the last century, one based on waves, the wave mechanics of Erwin Schrödinger, and one based on quanta, the matrix mechanics of Werner Heisenberg. While these pictures are equivalent, the way matter is presented to us in each picture is very different, and, taken together, would seem to contradict dramatically our everyday conceptions of the world we live in.

I would argue that the approach we need to take to resolve our philosophical problem of religious diversity is the same approach that was taken by the scientific community in solving the problem of the nature of light.

Paralleling quantum mechanics, our philosophical context needs not only to make room, as pluralism already does, for very different metaphysical pictures, it also needs to emphasize the likelihood that these are different pictures of a *single*, shared mystery of ultimacy. The two pieces that are missing in our current philosophical pluralism is, first, the acknowledgement that ultimate reality confronts humans with genuine dilemmas that, to one extent or another, we all share — a common mystery that is itself part of ultimacy. Second, it is a mystery (or mysteries) that permits a variety of equally viable explanations.

To a large extent, this is to assert what religions themselves already typically assert, namely that, first, the ultimate reality with which religions are concerned is one that we all share, and, second, that that reality is a mystery. Indeed, in marked contrast to most science and philosophy, religions as a matter of course make room for mystery at the center of their metaphysical beliefs. Thus we have the nameless Brahman, the Dao that cannot be named, the empty throne of Yahveh in Jewish Merkavah mysticism, the mystery of the Christian Trinity, the  $\text{sa\o{c}s\ra-nirv\}$  a equation of Mahayana Buddhism — to name just a few. Religions specialize in describing the unknown in terms of the known. What they do not appear to do very often or very well, however, is to acknowledge that the mystery they speak about is truly a mystery of ultimacy — in other words, one beyond what can be fully captured by *any one* metaphysical account *including* their own. Before quantum physics could move beyond its own exclusivist alternatives, it had to accept the strangeness of quantum reality. It is mystery acknowledged as *in fact* mystery that allows for a single ultimacy coupled with multiple, equally valid metaphysical pictures of that ultimacy.

Such a modification to pluralism modifies our epistemology as well. Pluralism's way of understanding different accounts of reality need not supplant that of religions themselves, but rather becomes one piece of a larger multifaceted epistemology characterized by a variety of *upāya* (to borrow a term from Buddhism) — a variety of skillful ways of knowing. Such an epistemology returns much of the burden of achieving philosophical understanding back to religions themselves. It is the individual views themselves that provide the insight. But it also does not leave us without criteria for judging between accounts. Ultimacy is shared, and different ways of gaining insight into ultimacy need, in the end, to complement each other.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, we have a metaphysics and an epistemology that allows us to be thoroughly pluralistic without sacrificing the authority of religious accounts of ultimate reality. It is an approach that is neither an exclusivist selection of one alternative over others nor an inclusivist merging of alternatives. Nor is it a pluralism conceived of as no more than an unbiased, scholarly approach to religious diversity. Rather, it is another sort of pluralism — pluralism with a proviso, a pluralism that is perhaps more like what Eck had in mind to begin with. It is pluralism with, in fact, a common ground. It is pluralistic in that it supports the integrity of conflicting alternatives, but it also asks us to understand different views as different approaches to a shared mystery of ultimacy.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> How different metaphysics and epistemologies might complement each other is the subject of *Reality and Mystical Experience* (F. Samuel Brainard, University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> The philosophical context for pluralism offered here is a clarification of an approach to metaphysics and epistemology that is not at all new. Indeed, it is quite likely what Dianna Eck had in mind to begin with. Certainly, it is what many others have in mind when they speak of religious pluralism. For example, a recent op-ed piece in the *New York Times* on pluralism speaks of a rabbi in Jerusalem seeking to reinterpret Judaism “in a way that embraced modernity, without weakening religious passion, and in a way that affirmed that God speaks multiple languages and is not exhausted by just one faith” (Thomas L. Friedman, “The Real War,” *New York Times*, OP-ED, 11/27/01: A19). For another example, in a forum on religious pluralism given at Princeton University a few years back, the Rev. James Forbes of Riverside Church in New York was addressing how he as a Christian was able to embrace other religious views. He said, quite simply, that he believed in a God that was greater than the God he believed in. Certain metaphors used in conjunction with religious pluralism also express the same idea. For example, the various religions of the world are sometimes spoken of as different paths leading up the a mountain. Each path is on the same mountain and takes you to the top, but because they start in different places, the paths not only appear to be quite different, they are in fact quite different.