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Epistemology and Religious Diversity

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## Epistemology and Religious Diversity

When evaluating disagreements over beliefs, epistemologists insist that each disagreeing party share the evidence for her belief. Presuming that both parties are equally intelligent, well informed, and thoughtful about their beliefs, unless one party has the evidence clearly on her side for why her belief is true or right, it is difficult for her to make a case for why she should maintain that belief. As a student of theology, I am interested in cases of epistemic disagreement when the beliefs in question are *religious* beliefs. For reasons of my concerns about the epistemic status of belief, I assume that religious pluralism entails epistemic disagreement. That is, the fact that different religious groups hold different beliefs means that different religious groups inevitably epistemically conflict with each other.

Let's say, for example, that religious pluralism creates the following situation: Christians claim that Jesus gave a new law for "God's people" to follow, which presumably surpasses the old law. While Jewish people might recognize Jesus as a historical figure who indeed preached a new set of religious precepts, they deny that the law of their scriptures has been superseded or rendered obsolete by Christian teaching. Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammed was the final prophet of God, whose teaching goes beyond both the Jewish law and the Christian Gospel. What special insight does the Christian tradition have that allows it to maintain its belief given the contradictory claims of Judaism and Islam? Likewise, what does Judaism claim to know that Christianity and Islam have missed? And what privileged information does Islam have to be sure that it is true in the face of Judaism and Christianity?

Approaching these questions from an epistemological perspective—that is, a perspective that privileges epistemic criteria and norms—how can theologians adequately handle situations of disagreement created by conflicting religious beliefs? To pursue this question, I first outline and critically evaluate what I see as four possible responses to the epistemic situation created by religious pluralism.

To be forthright about the limitations of this discussion, I am suggesting *types* of responses; as such, they lack much nuance and are somewhat one-dimensional. My intention here is not to set up simplistic models that I can then effortlessly defeat, but is rather to give a lay of the land, so to speak, of how theologians have dealt with the challenges raised by diverse religious beliefs. The second part of this paper takes up the fourth type of response, both pushing back on its problematic aspects and developing its productive aspects. To do this, I turn to my work interviewing women from diverse religious traditions who are engaged in interreligious dialogue.

### I. Religious Pluralism and Epistemic Disagreement

1. Relativist Position: The relativists begin by posing the question: what do the mainstream religions of the world hold in common? The relativists focus their exploration of religious pluralism on what beliefs are shared rather than on what beliefs are in conflict. They thus identify the shared core convictions of religious traditions. In doing this, the relativists theorize that all religions are making essentially the same core claims only in different forms.<sup>1</sup> Because the relativists understand difference in beliefs in light of prior or more fundamental shared core beliefs, they do not understand *different* religious beliefs as *disagreeing* or *conflicting* religious beliefs.

The relativist model does not do justice to the rich texture of religious diversity. By claiming that the various religious traditions are many paths to one thing, the relativists strip individual religious traditions of any unique value. This, in turn, implies that there is no real possibility for actual disagreement among religions. Difference is just difference. Because the relativists do not recognize that difference of belief means disagreement, epistemologically, this response fails to adjudicate between *actually* conflicting beliefs. The relativist response is finally inadequate because, while for good intentions, it avoids the epistemic problems raised by real difference.

2. Cultural-Linguist Position: The cultural-linguists begin with a self-reflective question: why do we believe what we believe? Their answer is that religious belief is a practice, inculcated over time and in

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<sup>1</sup> For a classic example of the relativist position see John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Humanity's Varied Response to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

community and guided by a specific set of doctrinal norms. To have a certain belief means to have a set of skills in understanding a grammar, language, and symbol system.<sup>2</sup> Believers in every religious tradition learn, and subsequently pass on, the grammar of their tradition. For the cultural-linguists, the question of religious disagreement is akin to a non-question. We cannot be certain of what other traditions are claiming, so how can we know if what they claim contradicts—or supports, for that matter—our belief? The cultural-linguists don't deny religious disagreement by saying that it doesn't *really* exist (as with the relativists) but rather deny it by saying that it is out of the purview of their expertise to evaluate. The best the cultural-linguists can hope for is to test the adequacy of their *own* religious claims on the basis of the grammar of their *own* tradition rather than against the beliefs of other traditions.<sup>3</sup>

The cultural-linguists are on the other end of the spectrum from the relativists. They respond to religious pluralism by saying that we can't be sure that religious traditions are even talking about the same thing. The cultural-linguist response is insufficient, and even troubling, for one primary reason: the underlying suggestion of this model is that different types of people are inherently quartered off from other types of people by virtue of their belonging to different groups (each with its own grammar). Claiming self-sufficiency for religious traditions is not, in the end, true to experience or productive for actually engaging disagreement. To say that religious traditions are impervious to religious disagreement because of mutual unintelligibility is to say putatively that one's religious beliefs win simply because they are one's own.

3. Adoptionist Position: The adoptionists begin with the question: what is valuable about other religious traditions for our own? The adoptionist response to religious diversity is to adopt as much of other religious traditions into their own belief system as they can. They find places in other religious

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<sup>2</sup> George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Westminster Press, 1984), 32. Lindbeck is the classic representative of the cultural-linguistic approach.

<sup>3</sup> The criteria of communal sustainability, fidelity to the tradition, soundness of interpretation of revelation are examples of how a cultural-linguist internally evaluates its own tradition.

traditions that agree with, contribute constructively to, or are fecund for their own beliefs and practices.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, what is valuable does not necessarily come in the form of what is easily amenable. The adoptionists attempt to approach other religious traditions with the same reverence and humility as they do their own. It is only due to an original and chosen commitment to their own tradition that they incorporate other religious beliefs into it rather than the other way around.

So long as one remains in the context of one's tradition (or tries to answer only to the authorities of that tradition), the adoptionists do well. They recognize the texture of difference and can see ways in which that difference both supports and challenges their own religious beliefs. They are willing and able, theoretically, to really encounter difference; that is, they do not have the strict model of the cultural-linguists who theoretically rule out the possibility of engagement. The adoptionist model is an inadequate response, however, to religious pluralism once one steps outside of one's own religious tradition. The adoptionist model fails because of its posture toward religious disagreement. In the end, the adoptionists do not meet pluralism with a readiness to give up their religious beliefs, but only in order to adopt views commensurable to their own ends.<sup>5</sup>

4. Suspensionist Position: The suspensionists begin with the question: how can any one tradition claim to have true belief given the fact that all other religious traditions also make claims to truth? If religious belief is like other types of belief, then the fact of pluralism poses a tough challenge for religious believers. For the suspensionists, when adjudicating among disagreeing religious beliefs, there is no evidence to suggest that any one tradition has it right over and against other traditions.<sup>6</sup> Considering that

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<sup>4</sup> NB: The adoptionists do not do this out of intentional disrespect for other religious traditions. There is a story of Karl Rahner, S.J. that is illuminative of this position. Several years after Rahner had coined the term "anonymous Christian," he participated in a radio interview wherein the radio host bluntly asked him how he would feel to be called an "anonymous Buddhist." Rahner responded, in earnest, that he would be honored. What Rahner's comment—quintessentially adoptionist in nature—conveys is the sense that it is perfectly acceptable and even encouraged to find positive value in other religious traditions for the sake of one's own. Karl Rahner, S.J. "Anonymous Christianity," *Theological Investigations* VII (New York: Crossroad Press, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> Epistemologists of disagreement will argue that, in a situation of disagreement, taking seriously the other party's position requires a genuine willingness to take on the opposing view as one's own. Without such willingness to do so, one does not—at the very bottom—value that position as much as one does one's own.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Feldman presents a variation of the suspensionist position in "Reasonable Religious Disagreement" (2004) <http://www.ling.rochester.edu/~feldman/papers.html>.

no one can be certain that they are right, the suspensionists take the position that the most epistemically responsible thing to do is to suspend belief. While the suspensionist position cannot find a way out of this situation (that is, suspending belief is the best possible epistemic response), suspensionists do not necessarily suggest that believers renounce the practices of religion: what is to be suspended is the belief that one's religious tradition has the *exclusive* claim to truth; this need not involve renouncing involvement in the religious tradition or religious practice itself.<sup>7</sup>

The suspensionists cannot deny that this creates somewhat of a disjuncture between belief and practice. However, suspensionists can respond by framing the issue as such: aren't belief and practice two distinct concepts for a good reason? The suspensionists make a general psychological or anthropological point here. All the time, people act and make choices to act in ways that are not consistent with their beliefs. Practice is not always dependent on belief or certainty of belief (although it certainly can be). There are many good cultural or social reasons for why one would continue to practice her religious tradition even if she were to suspend her belief.<sup>8</sup> The suspensionist finds no problem with the practice of membership in a religious community or with the idea that one can practice something without claiming to fully believe it.

The suspensionist position is the most epistemically honest position. It does not annul disagreement on the grounds of a core agreement (like the relativists), presuppose the truth of any religious tradition (like the adoptionists), find a clever way around the challenge of disagreement (like the cultural-linguists). Instead, it faces fully the challenge that conflicting disagreement poses for belief. Given epistemological standards, it is simply not acceptable to say that all religious beliefs can be maintained in the face of plural (conflicting) religious beliefs.<sup>9</sup> Assuming that the suspensionist position

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<sup>7</sup> One might wonder if this does this not drive too sharp a wedge between belief and practice.

<sup>8</sup> The practice of religion provides one with social community, a sense of marked off time, an occasion for self-reflection, the opportunity for leadership, the feeling of belonging, the chance for empowerment, and so on.

<sup>9</sup> It may be possible for the suspensionist to find places where the force of the evidence really does support one belief over another. As a general rule, though, the suspensionists are going to encourage suspending belief.

is the most epistemically responsible or healthy one, are there any ways to revise this position so as to not rule out the possibility of maintaining belief?

## II. In Defense of Maintaining Belief, or Revising the Suspensionist Position

One obvious strategy to take against the suspensionists is to argue for the special status of religious belief. The special-status argument begins by stating that the suspensionists wrongly level religious belief with all other types of complex belief (such as legal, moral, philosophical, or political beliefs). Without recognizing the unique attributes of religious belief, the special-status argument goes, the suspensionists do not recognize the actual barriers to belief suspension. There are at least three candidates for the special-status strategy of argumentation. Along with each, I point out the possible suspensionist rebuttal. These are can be stated such:

(Special-Status Claim 1) Because religious beliefs are formed in community, suspending belief will lead to severing ties with that community (including one's closest kin and family).

(Suspensionist Counterclaim 1) Giving up moral beliefs (or other types of complex belief) may also result in severing ties with one's community, so religious belief is not unique in that way.

(Special-Status Claim 2) Because religious beliefs are formed in religious communities, individual believers do not have the authority to individually reject those beliefs.

(Suspensionist Counterclaim 2) To say that it is not up to the individual believer to renounce communal religious belief makes it look like we do not have control over what we believe; we are no more wedded to our religious beliefs than we are to any other beliefs.

(Special-Status Claim 3) Because religious beliefs are formed by a communal practice, suspending belief *does* entail suspending practice. Unlike other types of belief, practice and belief in the case of religion are absolutely inseparable.

(Suspensionist Counterclaim 3) Even the most ardent religious believers admit to continued practice in a community even without believing at some times. Thus, there is no special problem in the case of religion that would prohibit one from suspending belief.<sup>10</sup>

The first argument for the special-status of religious belief cannot hold up under the weight of the suspensionist response. Although the second and third arguments do not stand on their own, it is my hunch that they may be useful for revising the suspensionist position. My suggestion for such a revision is as follows: as the third special-status argument points out, the suspensionist position is inadequate in its response to religious practice. The rift created between belief and practice raises a critical question

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<sup>10</sup> See Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta,"* edited and with commentary by Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

about the degree to which practice has a continued effect on belief. The suspensionist position, according to the second special-status argument, also underestimates the extent to which beliefs are communally formed and communally held. Would it be possible to combine these two arguments, framing them in terms of interreligious dialogue, in order to hypothesize how engaging in conversations with believers from other religious traditions can itself be thought of as a communal practice that is belief forming? And could this, in turn, challenge the suspensionist demand that religious believers suspend their beliefs in the face of pluralism? The idea that this is a *communal practice among diverse religious believers* is the hinge on which this proposition swings. Unless interreligious dialogue can be conceived of as moving beyond abstract discussion *about* belief, then this hypothesis would fare no better against a suspensionist or cultural-linguist critique than do the relativist or adoptionist positions.

For the past ten months, I have been involved in a “research conversation” with a women’s interreligious dialogue group in Philadelphia. These women, a group of about twenty, have been in dialogue together for the past eight years. They formed rather unintentionally after 9/11 and have since developed into a stable, deliberate, and richly textured community. In the course of my interviews with these women, I have been continually struck by how they experience their group meetings and time together—namely, that they are in a sacred space, are engaged in a religious practice together, and even that their meeting schedule has a liturgical rhythm. Their insights about their group’s practice, and how it has allowed them specifically to develop religious beliefs, has challenged my own thinking about religious knowing in the context of pluralism profoundly. On a very basic level, this research has pushed me to raise the question of whether there has been, in religious epistemology, a lack of attention to the actual relations and situations in which religious beliefs are formed. That is, has there been an effective erasure of the voices of everyday religious believers (and perhaps particularly the voices of women) that would otherwise shed light onto how epistemologists think about religious belief? My thoughts on this matter are unformed and open; the nascent hypothesis that I raised above is presented with the hope for feedback, criticism, and suggestions for how—or if—I can develop this further.

### III. Closing on a Theological Note

In one of his homilies as bishop, Augustine writes, “Si Comprehendis, non est Deus.” The Latin roughly translates: if you have understood God, then what you understand is not God.<sup>11</sup> What Augustine points out here is the idea that religious believers never actually have their finger on the truth. With every propositional claim the believer makes, she should be reminded that her claim is incomplete, temporary, and partial. The experience of engaging in interreligious dialogue and perhaps even the process of forming religious beliefs through the practice of interreligious dialogue can serve as reminders of this. Not many believers, including Augustine, would argue for a suspensionist response. But many would concede that the very best religious believers can ever do in the face of pluralism is to maintain their particular belief provisionally while ardently hoping that some day they will actually come to have their beliefs more fully assured.

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<sup>11</sup> Augustine, Sermon 117.3.5., *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999).