The Epistemic Implications of Religious Diversity•

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1. The general shape of the problem

The 'problem' of religious diversity has become one of the standard topics in philosophy of religion courses. More recently, it has become a weapon of the militant atheists in the 'culture wars'. The assumption in both contexts is that religious diversity is a potential *threat to the epistemic respectability of religious belief.* This is how the atheist Philip Kitcher sets out the problem, in uncompromising terms, in a recent collection entitled *The Joy of Secularism*:

> (1.1) The core challenge of secularism is an *argument from symmetry*. Variation in religious doctrine is enormous, and central themes in the world's religions are *massively inconsistent with one another*. Defenders of *supernatural beings* can sometime conceal the difficulty from themselves by focusing on a few religions with shared central doctrines inherited from a common origin – as for example when religious diversity is conceived in terms of the differences among the three Abrahamic monotheisms. More radical problems emerge once one recognizes the possibility of polytheism, of spirit worship, of the devotion to ancestors that pervades some African religions, of the sacred spaces of aboriginal Australians, of the 'mana' introduced in Polynesian and Melanesian societies. *Adherents of these rival views of the supernatural realm come to believe in just the same ways as do their Abrahamic counterparts.* They too stand in a long tradition that reaches back into the distant past, originating, so they are told, in wonderful events and special revelations. Plainly, if the doctrines about the supernatural favoured by the Christian – and also by Jews and Muslims – are correct, then *these alternative societies are terribly deceived*. Their members have been victims of an *entirely false mythology*, instead of the correct revelation lavished on the spiritual descendants of Abraham. What feature of the Christian's acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Saviour *distinguishes that commitment as privileged*, marks it off from *the (tragic) errors of the world's benighted peoples*?
> Nothing … *Had the Christians been born among the aboriginal Australians, they would believe, in just the same ways, on just the same bases,* and with just the same convictions, doctrines about the Dreamtime instead of about the Resurrection. The symmetry is complete. . Because of the *widespread inconsistency* in religious doctrine, it is clear that not all of these traditions can yield true beliefs about the supernatural. *Given that they are all on a par,* we should trust none of them.[1]

Although this is presented as a single argument (what Kitcher calls the 'argument from symmetry') it actually contains several different considerations that are supposed to make epistemic trouble for the adherents of a given religious worldview. Let me review these in turn.

2. The argument from inconsistency

The most prominent strand in Kitcher's reasoning, invoked at the start of his remarks, is an issue about the radical divergences in the claims made by different religions. At its simplest:

> (2.1) The different religions are inconsistent, therefore they cannot all be true.

• This is a typescript the definitive published version of which appeared in Peter Jonkers and Oliver J. Wiertz, (ed.), *Religious Truth and Identity in an Age of Plurality* (London: Routledge, 2021), Ch. 7, pp. 127-141.

[1] Philip Kitcher, 'Challenges for Secularism', in G. Levine (ed.), *The Joy of Secularism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 26, all emphases supplied.

This is of course a formal or logical rather than an epistemic problem as such: if X and Y are inconsistent, then if X is true Y must be false, and vice versa. But at best this shows that X and Y cannot both be true in *all* respects. There could be overlap, in so far as two inconsistent theories may both contain part of the truth, or some element of truth. Compare for example the wave and particle theories as applied to micro phenomena such as photons. Since the properties of waves and particles are inconsistent, both theories cannot both be true in *all* respects, nor can they contain the last and final word on the nature of light; but they may contain important elements of truth, or they may be an important stepping stone along the way to finding the truth. Kitcher does allow for the possibility of overlap between inconsistent theories, but assumes that it will only arise in cases where there is a common historical root to rival religions, as in the three main Abrahamic faiths (which are all monotheistic, for example). But he hasn't shown that it's impossible to find overlap areas, or common ground, between these religions and the other religions he mentions. He implicitly rules this out by focusing on what he calls the 'doctrines about the supernatural', which he takes to be the all-important core of a religious outlook, thus setting things up for his observation that there is 'massive inconsistency' between polytheism and monotheism, for example. But in the attitudes to the divine found among seemingly very diverse religions, in the archetypal human responses of awe and reverence for instance, or in the acts of worship that are part of a search for union or harmony with the divine, there may well be much more commonality of religious impulse and outlook than might be supposed if we concentrate only on theological doctrines about the 'supernatural'.

3. The problem of epistemic credentials

Since our chosen theme is the epistemic implications of religious diversity, let us now reformulate Kitcher's inconsistency objection in explicitly epistemic terms. It may be put as follows:

> (3.1) If any two religions X and Y are inconsistent, then we *know*, without further investigation that they cannot both be true (or at least that they cannot both be true in all respects).
> (3.2) So if we claim to *know* that X is true (or at least that it is closer to the truth than Y) then the epistemic credentials of X must be superior to those of Y.
> (3.3) But there is no such epistemic superiority: the epistemic credentials of any two religions X and Y will be found to be 'on a par' (all are equally defective).

Phrased this way, the argument is targeted at religious believers who claim to know for sure that their own religion is true. No doubt there are such believers. But there are probably many more, following in the footsteps of Kant who famously 'denied knowledge to make room for faith',[2] who present their favoured religion as an object of faith rather than knowledge. And traditionally (from Aquinas onwards) faith is held to be within the province of revealed truth, rather than demonstrative or scientifically/empirically certified knowledge.

Yet to formulate one's religious beliefs in terms of faith rather than knowledge clearly does not eliminate the problem of epistemic credentials. For if the defender of religion asserts that their allegiance to religion X is a matter of faith arising from revelation, this simply shifts the question on to how we know X's supposed 'revelation' is epistemically better grounded that Y's. This seems to be the thought behind Kitcher's comment that 'adherents of these rival views of the supernatural realm come to believe *'in just the same ways'* as do their Abrahamic counterparts.' He mentions stories of 'wonderful events and special revelations' from the past. So the question he raises, in effect, is about what justifies our saying that one of the alleged revelations is authentic in respect of its epistemic credentials while the others are spurious.

However, while most of the world's great religions do have founding narratives involving either mythical events or historical revelation of the divine, it is far from clear that these narratives,

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 2nd edn, 1787], B xxx

whether mythical or purportedly historical, are supposed bear the *whole epistemic weight* in supporting allegiance to the religion in question. A mere 'story of a wonderful event' is not supposed by any reflective believer to function on its own as the epistemic grounding for their religious belief. The influential Jewish religious thinker Abraham Heshel put the point powerfully over 60 years ago:

> (3.4) What was the source of the faith of the people in Biblical times? Is it correct to define their faith as an act of relying upon an inherited doctrine? Is it correct to say that for more than three thousand years the Jews had access to only one source of faith, namely the records of revelation? Is it true that Judaism derived its religious vitality exclusively from loyalty to the events that occurred in the days of Moses and from obedience to Scripture in which those events arc recorded? Such an assumption seems to overlook the nature of man and his faith. A great event, miraculous as it may be, if it happened only once, will hardly be able to dominate forever the mind of man. The mere remembrance of such an event is hardly powerful enough to hold in its spell the soul of man with its constant restlessness and vitality. There was *wrestling for insight* out of which Jewish faith drew its strength.[3]

The point about religion as an ongoing 'wrestling for insight' can be broadened out in a way that exposes the over-simplification of construing the epistemic credentials of faith merely in terms of revealed miraculous events. To adopt a religion, amongst other things, is to adopt a framework of interpretation which enables the world to be seen in a certain light, as having a meaning and value that cannot be derived merely from its material properties. Purported past events, to be sure, are thought of as disclosures of the divine, but so, for many believers, are a range of significant aesthetic and moral and spiritual experiences (compare the poet Hopkins' experience of the natural world, in its mysterious beauty, as 'charged with the grandeur of God).[4] Such experiences that are part of what it is to be human, and belong to our lives here and now. I suspect that if one conducted a survey of reflective believers asking about the epistemic grounding for their religious faith, one would find that it does not rest solely, or perhaps even mainly, on one-off miraculous occurrences, but rather is much more holistic affair, resting on a complex network of human experience which enables a richer and more abundant form of life. All this is part of 'revelation', for the believer, and is reasonably taken to provide epistemic support for allegiance to the religion in question.[5]

(4) *The counterfactual argument, or the argument from contingency.*

We now come to a further strand in Kitcher's argument which seems potentially more worrying for the believer, and which his chosen label 'the argument from symmetry' is designed to underline. He says: 'Had … Christians been born among the aboriginal Australians, they would believe, in just the same ways, on just the same bases, and with just the same convictions, doctrines about the Dreamtime instead of about the Resurrection.'

Put most simply, the argument appeals to the contingency of the cultural and historical circumstances in which the religious believer happens to have been born and brought up. You *happen* to have been born and educated in a Christian family, or in a predominantly Christian society, but if (counterfactually) circumstances had been different, you would have belonged to a different religion. If you had been born in Riyadh, to Islamic parents, you would almost certainly have been a Muslim. Or as John Stuart Mill put the point over a century and a half ago:

> (4.1) The same causes which make [someone] a churchman in London would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Pekin[*sic*].[6]

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[3] Abraham Joshua Heshel, *God in Search of Man*, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1955), 26.
[4] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God', from *Poems (1876–1889).*
[5] See John Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Ch. 3, §3.
[6] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* [1859], Ch. 2.

As has often been pointed out, however, contingency of this kind is not necessarily felt to be epistemically threatening in the case of scientific beliefs about the world, so it is not immediately clear why it should be threatening in the religious case.[7] If you had been born in the middle ages you would very likely have held the Earth to be flat, but that does not cast doubt on your present day claim to know that the Earth is spherical. Perhaps there is a degree of 'epistemic luck' involved here – we are lucky enough today to have access to photographs of the Earth taken from space, and a host of other data that were not available to our medieval counterparts, but our resulting claim to know more about the nature of the planet is not at all impugned by the fact that we might have thought differently had we not had access to this data.

This type of response relies on our being able to claim epistemic superiority in virtue of having better information, better data, more reliable methods. But this in turn invites a counter-response – one that Kitcher in fact makes: 'What feature of the Christian's acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Saviour *distinguishes that commitment as privileged,* marks it off from the (tragic) errors of the world's benighted peoples?' There is an implicit comparison with science here. Where there are divergent views about a scientific question such as the configuration of the solar system, the reason for epistemically privileging one view over the other is going to consist in an (in principle) detectable flaw or insufficiency in the data of one of the parties: the observations were not checked adequately; there was an error in measurement, telescopic observation of the heavens was not available at the time, and so on. The assumption is that nothing analogous is available in the religious case. So the confidence of Mill's 'churchman in London' is not based on his ability to point to epistemically superior methods of arriving at the truth, but is due (as Mill puts it earlier on in the passage mentioned above) to 'mere accident' – that is to say, the mere contingencies of historical or geographical circumstance.

This raises many complex questions about epistemic luck which there is no space to pursue here.[8] But it may be easier to determine how far, if at all, the 'accidents' of birth and culture are epistemically damaging if we switch from the analogy with scientific knowledge to the analogy with moral knowledge. Is historical or cultural contingency damaging to the epistemic status of *moral* knowledge claims? Some philosophers, of course, hold that morality is not a cognitive matter at all, but that what look like moral statements are in fact disguised expressions of emotional reaction or personal or social preference. But assuming for present purposes the correctness of an objectivist view of moral truth – which most philosophers working today would support in one form or another – let us consider for example the proposition that slavery is wrong. Virtually everyone today would probably say they know this for certain: if there *are* genuine moral truths, and if *any* of them can be said to be known, this is one of them. But however clear and certain this appears to almost all of us in the twenty-first century, we do not have to further back than a couple of centuries to find a time when it was fiercely debated; and if we go back to the Classical world of ancient Greece and Rome, we find a culture where, so far from being recognized as wrong, slavery was universally accepted as part of normal life.

There are various ways of coming to terms with this kind of contingency and variation, but the most promising, and most intuitively plausible, seems to me to construe moral knowledge as something that *develops slowly over time.* Just as scientific truths do not present themselves straightforwardly to the inquirer, but have to be established by a long hard process of refining our observations and our theories, so insight into moral truths develops over time, as people learn to reflect more carefully on the human condition and (amongst other things) on the differences and similarities between peoples. Facts concerning our common human vulnerability, for example, may prompt thoughts of the kind we find starting to emerge in the Hebrew bible ('do not mistreat the

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[7] Compare Alvin Plantinga, 'Pluralism: a defence of religious exclusivism', in T. D. Senor (ed.), *The rationality of belief and the plurality of faith* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 191-215.

[8] See Max Baker-Hytch, "Religious Diversity and Epistemic Luck", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 76 (2014), 171-91.

foreigner, for *you* were once slaves in Egypt');[9] and though all sorts of reasons, of convenience, of self-interest, of inertia, or sheer thoughtlessness, may lead people to accept social arrangements which ignore the extent to which we are all fundamentally 'in the same boat',[10] further reflection, and repeated challenge by prophets and reformers will, if all goes well, bring people closer to the truth. So although it may well have been the case that I would have supported slavery had I been a sugar grower in the Caribbean or a cotton farmer in South Carolina in the eighteenth century, this merely shows that my eighteenth-century *alter ego* had failed to make the kind of moral progress that we take for granted in later generations. The upshot is that the counterfactual scenario specifying what I would have believed under different cultural circumstances need not count against the sound epistemic status of my present-day belief that such a slavery was and is morally repugnant.

5. Exclusivism and the 'benighted'

So what happens if we accept, in the domain of religion, the kind of 'progressivist' model just sketched with respect to morality and science (i.e. the model according to which our epistemic grasp of the relevant truths steadily improves over time)? It seems that progressivism may enable us to escape the challenge of the 'counterfactual' appeal (the appeal to what I would have believed in different cultural circumstances) – but apparently at a high cost. The cost might seem to be the adoption an arrogant exclusivism: the stance that *I,* or *we,* in our epistemically privileged position are entitled to claim knowledge (of scientific, moral, religious) truths, but that the beliefs if those in past epochs or different cultures were or are or just *wrong* – epistemically defective, as it were. This appears to be the point raised by Kitcher when he speaks (with heavy irony) of the 'tragic errors of the world's benighted peoples.'

We might perhaps be prepared to bite the bullet in the scientific case, for we do in fact think that the approaches e.g. to medicine or astronomy found in previous epochs were simply mistaken or based on epistemically suspect credentials; and we might even accept it in the moral case – thinking for example that our moral intuitions have simply been refined and improved as compared with societies that used to allow child labour, wife-beating, forced marriages and so on. But in the religious case, though we may be prepared to condemn certain forms of religion in other cultures (and indeed our own past) as epistemically flawed, because based on mere superstition or fear – as possible examples one might think of voodoo, or witchcraft, or early cults involving blood sacrifice – the rise of global awareness and a greater awareness of the sophistication and rich spirituality of religious traditions other than our own has made it much harder to share the arrogant exclusivism of our Victorian forebears in their attitude to the 'lesser breeds without the law'.[11] Such an objectionable (to our present eyes) arrogance can be vividly seen in a verse from the once popular nineteenth-century hymn 'From Greenland's Icy Mountains':

(5.1) Shall we, whose souls are lighted
with wisdom from on high,
Shall we to those benighted
the lamp of life deny?
Salvation! O salvation!
The joyful sound proclaim,
Till earth's remotest nation
has learned Messiah's Name.[12]

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[9] Deuteronomy 5:15; 24:18.

[10] Compare Philippa Foot's criticism of Nietzsche's moral myopia in this respect in her 'Nietzsche's Immoralism,' in R. Schacht (ed.) *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 3-14.

[11] Rudyard Kipling, 'Recessional', composed for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, 1897.

[12] 'From Greenland's Icy Mountains' (1819), by the Anglican parson Reginald Heber, who became Bishop of Calcutta in 1823.

The attitude has not entirely disappeared. In our own time we find militant fundamentalists of various creeds who apparently envisage a world in which their own chosen form of orthodoxy will reign supreme over all the planet. But (no doubt as a result of many factors, including rapidly widening travel and communication) there has also arisen, in many quarters, a more reflective 'globalist' outlook that inclines towards tolerant and even welcoming acceptance of diversity in religious belief, even on the part of those who are themselves devoutly committed to a particular creed or faith. So what are the epistemic implications of these 'globalist' developments? In particular, can one combine an open-minded and tolerant *globalism* with the *progressivism* we saw reason to advocate earlier in the scientific and moral domains? And how does this bear on the traditional aspirations of the various religions to truth and objectivity?

(6) Globalism, objectivity and convergence

It might at first be thought that welcoming a plurality of faiths involves retreating to a kind of wishy-washy liberal relativism, which abandons any claim to objectivity. For in religion, as in other domains, to believe in objective truth and knowledge is necessarily to believe that there are right and wrong answers. In the domain of scientific inquiry, for example, it seems evident that the existence of a plurality of competing explanations and rival theories a sign that something is amiss and needs to be resolved. To be sure, different teams of scientists may pursue different hunches and different lines of inquiry, but the expectation is that ultimately our scientific theories will *converge*, or at least show a tendency to converge, as they get closer to the truth. As Bernard Williams once observed, in science

> (6.1) there should ideally be convergence on an answer, where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that *the answer represents how things are*.[13]

The very notion of objectivity in the sciences seems to presuppose that our theories and explanations should in principle be constrained by the way the world is, so that there will, or should ideally, be a convergence which is, as Williams went on to put it, 'guided … by how things actually are.'

In the domain of morality, in contrast to that of scientific inquiry, Williams himself was very sceptical about the possibility of convergence: he saw no prospect of a 'convincing theory of knowledge for the convergence of reflective ethical thought on ethical reality in even a distant analogy to the scientific case'.[14] His attitude here partly reflected the influence upon him of Nietzsche's deflationary view of the status of morality, that 'peculiar institution', as Williams called it, based on the (supposedly dubious) idea of binding and inescapable obligations.[15] The current philosophical consensus however, has emerged as very much more sympathetic to the idea of objective and authoritative moral requirements than was common among Williams's generation; and it is probably fair to say that the majority of moral philosophers working today hold that there are objectively right answers to ethical and moral questions. Such answers may of course be very difficult to establish (requiring complex investigation and careful debate), and there may also be hard cases where we are forced to choose between competing goods; but in principle (so runs the prevailing contemporary view) genuine objective ethical truth about what is good and right is, as it were, already there waiting to be investigated, just as scientific truth is. And this gives grounds for thinking that, although it may take a long time to achieve, we may in principle expect an ultimate convergence in ethical thought, just as in science.[16]

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[13] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Collins, 1985), Ch. 8, 136.
[14] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits*, 152.
[15] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits*, Ch. 10.
[16] For more on the issues raised in this section see John Cottingham, "The Spiritual and the Sacred: Prospects for Convergence between Religious and Non-Religious Accounts", in Richard Norman and Tony Carroll (eds), *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide* (London: Routledge, 2017), Ch. 11, pp. 130-139.

In the case of religious thought, by contrast, things look more intractable. For here what is at stake is not just the acceptance of a theory in physics (for example about the nature of gravity) or in ethics (for example about the relation between justice and utility), but the adoption of an outlook concerning the ultimate significance of the entire universe and our place within it. Thus the theist, who holds that the meaning of each individual's existence lies in his or her relationship to a loving personal Creator, will presumably see the whole of reality in a completely different light from the Buddhist who maintains that the very idea of an individual self is an illusion and that the cosmos is an impersonal flux of conditions that arise and pass away. The prospect for convergence between such radically distinct and incommensurable worldviews appears, to say the least, remote.

Yet the advocates of the distinct outlooks just mentioned nevertheless firmly believe that their own respective worldviews are *objectively correct*, representing the true, the enlightened, answer as to the ultimate nature of reality. And to espouse an objectivist view of truth, as we have just seen, is to hold that differing views ought ultimately to converge. Hence, if one maintains that, for example, the Islamic, or the Christian, or the Buddhist worldview is objectively correct, this seems to carry with it a presumption that ultimately, given enough time and the right conditions, everyone on the planet should come to acknowledge the truth of the worldview in question. And this *might* seem to lead us back to what we earlier called an 'arrogant exclusivism', as the only position consistent with maintaining the idea of objective truth and knowledge in religion. In fact however, such an inference would be wholly mistaken, since, as will appear in the following (and final) section, there is no logical connection whatever between subscribing to objectivism in religion and subscribing to exclusivism.

(7) Human epistemic finitude and the limits of religious knowledge

There is no denying the existence of an exclusivist tendency in the great monotheistic religions, which have often laid claim to be the sole repositories of truth about the divine. One only has to think of the Augustinian slogan *Extra ecclesiam non est salus*,[17] or the view held by many Muslims that the Qur'an is 'the Final Revelation … the last scripture revealed by Almighty Allah, confirming what little truth remains in parts of previous scriptures and refuting and correcting fabrications and additions which have crept into current day versions of such scriptures.'[18]

But it is also true, and important, that the great monotheistic religions hold God to be incomprehensible – this being an established mainstream theological doctrine within the Abrahamic tradition. God, in Judaism, is utterly unlike the gods of the gentiles; he cannot be beheld and is too sacred even to be named – he is simply 'I am that I am'.[19] In Islam, Allah has no less than ninety-nine names, [20] but although we may be able to glimpse something of the attributes to which these names refer, it is held to be impossible for our limited human capacity to comprehend the essence of God. And in Christianity, as emphasised by the doctors of the Church from Augustine through to Aquinas and beyond, God cannot be grasped or comprehended by the human mind – any attempt to suppose we *had* grasped his nature would be a form of idolatry.[21] Much more recently, the contemporary philosopher John Schellenberg, writing outside the framework of traditional theism, has stressed the relatively minute period of time, in planetary terms, during which human religious thought about the ultimate nature of reality has been operating, and has proposed a view he calls 'ultimism', according to which it is reasonable to suppose that up till now human religious awareness has scarcely scratched the surface.[22]

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[17] Augustine of Hippo *On Baptism* [*De Baptismo contra Donatistas*, 400], IV, xvii, 24

[18] See for example http://islamicpamphlets.com/the-quran-the-final-revelation-to-mankind/ accessed 26 October 2016.

[19] Exodus 3:13.

[20] According to tradition (*hadith*); many of the traditionally cited names are taken from the Qur'an.

[21] Augustine, *Sermones* [early 5th century] 52:16; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266-73], Part I, Qu. 12, art. 7.

[22] John Schellenberg *Evolutionary Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Seen against the background of these traditional and more recent reminders of our human finitude and our radical epistemic limitations, there seems good reason to be wary of religious adherents who make strident knowledge claims, proclaiming that their beliefs represent knowledge of the final and ultimate truth. Given the incomprehensibility of the infinite to the finite human intellect,[23] it seems both prudent and necessary for reflective religious believers to characterize their outlook in more *tentative terms*, as a search, a reaching forward to the divine. Such a reaching forward, if it is not to be entirely directionless, will no doubt have be based on something in our human epistemic equipment that is held to provide glimpses or intimations of the divine; but will most emphatically not need to claim definitive knowledge, let alone knowledge of the complete and final truth. Thus even St Paul, not perhaps best known for being tentative, and who was sure that in Christ he had glimpsed the 'image of the invisible God',[24] was nevertheless fully ready to acknowledge our inherent human epistemic limitations: 'now we see through a glass, darkly.'[25]

Those attracted to this more cautious and humble view of our human epistemic endowments may be prepared to put on indefinite hold the theoretical requirement that competing worldviews should ultimately converge on the truth, constrained by the reality of 'how things actually are'. Such convergence will, to be sure, will be the ultimate *telos*, the 'point omega' of religious inquiry – so much is required by objectivism; but in the mean time, given our human finitude, it will be *accepted, and indeed expected*, that the religious search will be a long and arduous one (this is the 'progressivism' we discussed earlier), and that it will follow many paths, partly conditioned by historical and cultural circumstance. This surely is part of the meaning of what remains for its time one of the most thoughtful attempts to confront the 'epistemic problem of religious diversity', the declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965), which speaks of the 'ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence', and goes on:

> (7.1) From ancient times down to the present day there is found in various peoples a certain recognition of that hidden power which is present in history and human affairs. Religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways", comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.[26]

Seen through this kind of lens, there is no insoluble epistemic 'problem' about religious diversity, but rather a universal human longing for objective meaning and value which is glimpsed and expressed in diverse ways. The 'problem' that remains, if there is one, is not a theoretical problem for the philosophy of religion, but rather a practical problem about how the specific *commitment and allegiance* that is necessary for a religion to flourish can be combined with a respect for different but equally powerful commitments expressed in divergent faiths – commitments that one recognizes could very well have been one's own had things been different (a practical form of the 'counterfactual' or 'contingency' objection). But there is no contradiction in, for example, being wholeheartedly committed to one's spouse while recognizing that, had the accidents of social encounter been different, one might have married someone else. And there is no contradiction in recognizing that marriages may take many divergent forms, that all are responses to the universal 'restlessness of the human heart', and that each relationship over time becomes incorporated into a form of life that (if all goes well) enables those involved to find objective

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[23] Compare Descartes, *Meditations* [1641], Third Meditation. See also Hami Verbin (chapter in present volume) on the absolute transcendence of the divine.
[24] Colossians I:15.
[25] I Corinthians 13:12.
[26] *Nostra Aetate*: Second Vatican Council declaration of "The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (1966).

meaning and value. Without labouring the comparison, somewhat analogous points can reasonably be made about religious commitment.

It is worth ending, finally, by reminding ourselves that philosophers of religion often over-intellectualize their subject, taking religious allegiance to be solely a matter of theories and doctrines. Conceived of that way, it is hardly surprising that the exclusive focus is on truth conditions and knowledge claims. These have been our main concern in this paper. But we need to realize – as indeed is suggested by the phrase from *Nostra Aetate* about 'ways, rules of life and sacred rites' – that a great deal of religious observance relates to moral and spiritual *praxis* rather than theological theory. And it is clear that at this practical level what we often find is not divergence, but a remarkable degree of convergence.

Those who, through direct personal experience and encounter, have come to appreciate something of this convergence would probably tend to agree with the monk Klaus Klostermaier, who spent two years in Vrindaban, a sacred Hindu place of pilgrimage. Recording his experience of dialogue with those of a very different faith tradition he later wrote:

> (7.2) Dialogue was not a mere talking about religion: that is very often pure babble, vanity, self-glorification. Nor was dialogue the 'comparative religion' of experts … How strangely empty and flat those books now seem to us, those books that have been written about other people's religions as though they were museum pieces… How little the dialogue depends on our philosophical systems.[27]

What Klostermaier came to see was that at the practical level of human need, the enduring struggle for meaning amid the anguish of human life, we will always find common ground, irrespective of differences of doctrine and ideology.[28] Let us leave the last word on this subject with Rudyard Kipling whose insight into of religious diversity was also shaped by formative experience in India and by his personal contact with the richly interwoven tapestry of cultural and religious traditions he found there:

> (7.3) My brother kneels, so saith Kabir,
> To stone and brass in heathen-wise,
> But in my brother's voice I hear
> My own unanswered agonies.
> His God is as his fates assign;
> His prayer is all the world's – and mine.[29]

[27] Klaus Klostermaier, *Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 102-4. I am grateful to Keith Ward for drawing my attention to this book.
[28] Compare Peter Jonkers (chapter in present volume) on religious hospitality and epistemic humility as a way to respond to exclusivist truth claims.
[29] Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* [1901], Ch. XIV.