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Saving the particulars: religious experience and religious ends

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Abstract: Conflict in the testimony of religious experiences appears to seriously undercut its evidential value. Arguments that make positive appeal to the evidence of religious experience usually deal with this objection by denying evidential value to the particularistic elements in such experience as descriptive of an ultimate religious reality and an ultimate human end. Using the work of Jerome Gellman, I contend that the referential value of diverse and particular religious testimony can be saved. I suggest that the strongest form of this argument requires two assumptions: the possibility of multiple religious ends and intrinsic complexity in the religious object. If the argument is valid, these assumptions may also serve as theological criteria.

Religious experience and religious knowledge

The diversity of religious experiences is often taken as evidence impeaching religious truth claims and their epistemological validity. This is particularly true of religious experiences bearing on the nature of the ultimate religious reality or on the ultimate human religious end. Religious accounts of these matters conflict with each other. Is the religious object personal or impersonal? Is the ultimate human end better described as *nirvana* or as communion with God? This conflict makes it difficult to appeal to cumulative religious testimony in support of a positive religious proposition. Those who appeal to religious experience as evidence often minimize the distinctive particularity in various religious accounts, in order to enlist the largest possible number of those accounts in support for what must be, correspondingly, highly general propositions. The attempt to enlist global religious experience in support of religious propositions seems to entail that these propositions themselves must be shorn of most distinctive religious content, so that they do not remain concretely Buddhist or Christian or Hindu, for example.

In a recent article William Rowe has considered one attempt (that of John Hick) to postulate a religious object that might be claimed as the referent in virtually all religious experiences (those that report it as impersonal as well as those that report

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it as personal, for instance). Rowe finds a distinct liability in this postulated object: it cannot possibly exist.[1] This is so because it is by definition excluded from each of two classes of existents, characterized by the two contradictory properties personal and not-personal, while these two classes together are rightly construed to encompass all existents. At the very least, Rowe demonstrates the great difficulty of affirming the evidential value of all religious experience, while at the same time retaining significant cognitive content in the propositions for which the experiences are supposed to count as evidence. The more religious experience one affirms as evidence for the religious object, the more empty that object becomes. A similar dynamic exists in relation to an ultimate religious end. The more that religious accounts are taken as veridical accounts of this end, the more empty that end becomes.[2]

This article develops the parallel between the epistemology of religious experience and that of religious goals, arguing that each illuminates the other. I argue that we can enhance the evidential value of the testimony of religious experience if we allow for the possibility of multiple religious ends. On this hypothesis, divergent reports from religious experience about conditions achieved by humans in connection with the religious ultimate can be credited largely in their own particularistic (even contrasting) terms. Religious experiences differ partly because different religious ends are being pursued and achieved in relation with God. This variety of ends and this variety in religious descriptions of the religious object need not undercut the contention that there is one, determinate religious ultimate, so long as that religious object is understood as complex in its nature, with qualities that allow for varied relations with humans.

If there were numerous religious ultimates as the objects of various faiths, and a number of religious ends paired with those different objects, then variety of religious experience would be exactly what one would expect. The diversity of religious reports would not conflict, in the sense that one counted against the truth of another. Let us suppose one group of people worshipped trees, another worshipped Apollo, yet another worshipped their ancestors, and yet another worshipped an angelic power from the planet Neptune. Let us further suppose that the beliefs of each of these groups were essentially correct. What the worshippers expect from these relationships is truly realized. We can well understand how these adherents would lead different kinds of lives and reach different ends. Because there are various actual religious powers, it makes sense that they might have quite diverse (even opposing) characters and constitute quite different conditions for people who relate to them. Devotees of one religious power need not deny the reality of another, nor the reality of the religious fulfilment it offers.

This situation (which was apparently characteristic of the first century Graeco-Roman world) makes a pluralism of religious ends appear quite natural. The fact that a variety of religious experience and of religious aims is plainly to be observed has always been an item in favour of a more polytheistic outlook. From that

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outlook, religious experiences vary because there are differences on the object end of the experience. When such a perspective is rejected in favour of a monotheistic assumption, the diversity of religious experience becomes more problematic. One religious ultimate and one religious end seem to suggest there should be uniform experience. Variety requires some explanation.

If the polytheistic outlook explains the diversity of religious experience largely by variety on the object end, it is common for contemporary versions of the monotheistic outlook to stress diversity on the subject end. If the same religious ultimate figures in all true religious experience, it is the different cultural locations and psychological states of the experiencers that account for the distinct character of those experiences. If we add to this an axiom that there is no reason to privilege any particular set of experiences or associated religious beliefs, we get the very influential contemporary perspective on religious pluralism perhaps best expressed in John Hick's 'pluralistic hypothesis'.[3] On this view, the religious ultimate is in itself unknowable, but varied religious experiences arise in response to encounter with that ultimate. We can only say that in this or that particular cultural context humans expressed their encounter with the ineffable mystery in these terms. As Stanley Samartha puts it, 'Although each response to Mystery has a normative claim on the followers of that particular tradition, the criteria derived from one response cannot be made the norm for judging the responses of other traditions.'[4]

The polytheistic outlook tells us there are many religious objects and ends, and religious experiences give us concrete, valid information about them. From the 'monomystery' outlook, there is a single religious ultimate and a single religious end, but religious experiences give us virtually no concrete information about either of them. All the particularity in the experiences comes from the subject side. John Hick develops this view in order to defend the reasonableness of a religious interpretation of reality. A key element in that defence is the evidence of religious experience. Hick argues that in the absence of definitive rational proof for or against religious interpretation of the world, it makes sense for people to take religious experience as a deciding factor in favour of religious faith:

> **… if in the existing situation of theoretic ambiguity a person experiences life religiously, or participates in a community whose life is based upon this mode of experience, he or she is rationally entitled to trust that experience and to proceed to believe and to live on the basis of it.**[5]

However, which way the weight of the evidence of religious experience should fall seems to depend on what it is taken of evidence for. If it is supposed to be evidence for some particular, confessional religious reality – for a specific kind of religious ultimate or a concrete religious end among others – then only some of it counts for that thesis, and much of it goes in another direction. Religious experiences don't uniformly testify to a single description of the religious ultimate. This could be taken as providing good reason not to believe in any specific

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religious ultimate or end. Some philosophers of religion suggest that, if we were to take the traditions' specific claims seriously in any concrete sense, we would undercut the value of *all* religious experience as evidence, since it would then support a mass of conflicting propositions. On the other hand, if religious experience is weighed as evidence for *some* kind of religious ultimate, a mystery unknown in itself, then it might all be taken to point in the same direction. If religious experience is to count cumulatively as evidence for the same proposition, that proposition will have to be one of extraordinary generality.

This is precisely John Hick's argument. If religious experience is to testify consistently to any truth, it must be one that is beyond the obvious contradiction of various concrete religious experiences. Therefore, he holds that one who wishes to defend a religious interpretation of reality is in fact compelled toward some version of the 'pluralistic hypothesis', which construes the experiences as conditioned versions of the same encounter with the 'Real'.[6] If we are looking only for evidence that humans are in contact with an *x*, then we can count all religious experience as evidence in favour of our thesis, even if all we can say about our *x* is that humans adopt this series of dispositions toward it. Religious experience will rule against each religion taken one at a time, but it will support religion collectively, all at once. As Chris Firestone has pointed out, there is some irony in the fact that, although Hick authorizes religious experience as the key factor that makes religious belief cognitively defensible, *no* particular in religious experience's account of the religious object is taken as trustworthy. The validity of religious experience as contact with the religious object is verified by a different test altogether, a moral one. Religious experiences are genuine encounters with the Real if they issue in moral life practice.[7]

There seems to be some sleight of hand in co-opting the specific accounts of varied religious experience as evidence for one mysterious and virtually unspecified entity as the referent in each case. The argument in defence of that move goes as follows. Since religious experiences are varied and even conflicting, there are only three options: to reject them all as illusory, to take a few as reliable and reject all others as false, or to take them all as symbolic or mythical representations of a real but mysterious reality. If one is committed to a religious outlook, the first option is ruled out. If one adopts the second option, then you have to explain away the religious experiences that do not have the 'right' confessional features, without undercutting the validity of the experiences that do – a difficult task. Some version of the third option then must be defended as the best way to validate religion, because one can argue that all the evidence supports the religious hypothesis (though admittedly in a very loose sense).

This analysis of religious experience is flawed by the failure to consider all options. In any other area when we are faced with diverse perceptions (including conflicting ones), it is unusual to conclude that none of these perceptions are in touch with the world itself but all are responses to an 'unexperienced noumenon'.[8]

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The more common strategy is to seek some reconciliation of the inconsistencies. If this can be done in a manner that saves the validity of the perceptions themselves, this is rationally preferable to advancing a theory that drastically undercuts confidence in any connection between the perceptions and reality.

When confronted with quite diverse experiential accounts of an object, person or event, we do not usually limit our alternatives to the three given above, i.e. (1) to regard all the accounts as illusory; (2) to hold that the different accounts cancel each other out and therefore make any particular description of the object improbable; or (3) to conclude that all the experiences do reflect encounter with a single reality, but don't tell us anything about that reality in itself, only about the kind of dispositions people develop after meeting it. This last approach especially seems very strained. When applied to the evidence of religious experience, it imposes a high level of consistency, even uniformity, on that experience, but at the cost of reducing its referential value to near zero. The three options leave out a better alternative.

Gellman on religious experience

In a recent book, Jerome Gellman has made a careful and convincing case for a quite different approach to religious experience and religious pluralism.[9] Gellman's larger argument is that philosophical consideration of religious experience provides rational support for the existence of God. He considers the diversity of religious experience as a possible challenge to this argument. He notes that most of what is regarded as incompatibility in religious experiences can be dealt with in the same way that we deal with discrepancies in other varied experiences of the same reality. Different aspects of one reality may come uppermost in experience at different times and for different people. Here the cultural conditioning and personal idiosyncrasies which Hick wishes to make the sources of the entire content of religious experience (with a bare stimulus coming from the religious ultimate itself) are given full scope as significant factors.

Gellman's thesis stresses that it is fully possible to have a determinate view of the religious ultimate and still to retain the evidentiary value of religious experience. In order to conclude that two experiences of God are incompatible,

> **... what we need is at least some alleged experiences showing that God's character is *exclusively* of one sort, with other alleged experiences showing that God's character is exclusively of another, *logically incompatible* sort. Or we need alleged experiences showing that God's character is exclusively of one sort, and that God never can seem to act out of character, with alleged experiences showing God acting out of *that* character.**[10]

Though such pairs of experiences exist, Gellman maintains they are fewer than often supposed. And major religious traditions have developed ways of

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harmonizing the dissonant experiences, ways not philosophically inferior to Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. Gellman says 'The attempt at harmonization should be guided by the desire to accommodate as much of the appearances as is possible as indicative of reality. Any adjudication which in this regard saves more phenomenal content than another is to be preferred, everything else being equal'.[11] Though conflicting religious explanations for the data of religious experience cannot all be correct, this does not remove the presumptive value of the data.

This is particularly so if the divine object is understood to have a complex nature. Gellman says that if some people experience God as loving and others experience God as just, 'they may both be experiencing the true nature of God, a nature both loving and just'.[12] Within most religious traditions, a certain spectrum of varying religious experiences is presumed. And within most religious traditions the religious ultimate is characterized in some way by having multiple attributes, even 'polar attributes'.[13]

More to the point, Gellman notes that alleged experiences of God 'often include the perception of God's inexhaustible fullness'.[14] He suggests that in religious experience something about God is openly revealed or directly encountered, but that typically the same experience also includes a perception of God's 'inexhaustible plenitude, a plenitude only intimated but not open to view'.[15] Gellman believes that this is what religious people mean in referring to their experiences as 'ineffable'. Since the same people who call them ineffable take great care in describing and distinguishing them from other experiences, Gellman suggests that it is the dimension of plenitude, of unknown further depths in the one being experienced, that is indicated with this language. In a simple analogy, we might compare this to our experience of a person we know in a certain context as a co-worker, a teacher. At some time we might hear from others who claim to know a quite different dimension of this person. Perhaps they served with her in a war, or know her as an outstanding musician, or as a former professional athlete. We would respond one way to these alleged experiences if we felt confident we had a near-exhaustive familiarity with the person. We would respond quite differently if our own experience already included intimations of unknown spaces, years unaccounted for, signs of a prior life, even an indefinable sense of depth in the person. Strictly speaking, we had no experience of these other facets. But we might receive these new accounts as reasonable *confirmation* of our prior intimation of something undisclosed. 'I might have known that something like this was the case'. Such accounts would go far to reconcile what previously seemed contradictory reports: one person's insistence that our co-worker's vocation was as a musician and another's insistence that her vocation was teaching English.

Gellman, who holds God to be a personal being, says God is not *only* a personal being. God is:

> **… an inexhaustible being, possessed of an inexhaustible, hidden plenitude, save for that part of the plenitude with whose open, revealed presence the subject is graced.**

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> **… Given all of this, *judging from what is revealed of God in experience*, we can readily see how it could be possible for God to be experienced in ways other than and contradictory to His being a personal being. For instead, other features of God could emerge into the open out of the plenitude, just as God's personhood does. God could be experienced wholly as an impersonal being. And we can readily understand how it could be possible that the experience of God as a wholly impersonal being would be pure 'bliss and joy', as are experiences of impersonal Brahman.**[16]

Experiences of God as personal and experiences of the divine as impersonal are thus reconciled, with each retaining cognitive validity. It would not be possible to effect this reconciliation if the experiences in question were of the divine as nothing but personal and experiences of the divine as nothing but impersonal. It is the dimension of plenitude in the experiences that makes this possible.

Peter Byrne helpfully distinguishes between metaphorical and aspectival accounts of the divine.[17] His aspectival account basically corresponds to Gellman's reconciliation of diverse reports as largely accurate descriptions of a single complex reality. Metaphorical accounts are irreducibly distinct, and even contradictory models that are apt for 'understanding a reality that is for the most part beyond all literal, positive statement'.[18] Byrne sees a need for both accounts. Aspectival language describes different concrete manifestations of the divine while metaphorical language refers to the divine transcendence, that which necessarily remains in principle indescribable. This helps us to clarify Gellman's dimension of plenitude in religious experience. The intimation of unrevealed depths can bear both on aspectival features not present in this experience but possible in other experiences and on qualities of the divine that transcend our experience altogether.

Gellman's concern is to rescue the maximum volume of religious experience as rational warrant for the existence of God. He offers this harmonization of diverse experiences simply as an example, showing that it is possible and therefore that diversity of religious experience cannot be used to rule out its validity as evidence for the existence of God. He also shows that to achieve this end it is not necessary to go to the extreme of denying that God is experienced as God actually is in *any* of these experiences. Instead, Gellman's example shows that one can rationally maintain that in both experiences there is encounter with real aspects of one God.

This also indicates that not all proposed reconciliations of this diverse data are equal. Gellman's reconciliation of the data in terms of a personal God makes a striking comparison with another version offered by the tradition of Advaita Vedanta. From this perspective, experience of a divinity with personal characteristics is experience of *saguna brahman* (the ultimate with attributed qualities) as opposed to *nirguna brahman* (the ultimate without such qualities). There is a clear hierarchy between these two. *Saguna brahman* is a lower level of truth, suitable for people at an earlier level of spiritual development.[19] *Nirguna brahman*

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is the true religious ultimate, and personalistic representations of it must eventually give way, dispelled as instrumental illusion. The two categories of religious experience are reconciled, but by making one an imperfect form of the other, an imperfect form which can be eliminated completely with no religious loss. A classic parable likens enlightenment to a person who believes she sees a snake in the path and then realizes it is a piece of rope. In this realization the illusion of an animate agent evaporates, to leave only a true insight into impersonal reality in its place.

Personalistic theism, Gellman's example, provides a reconciliation of a different sort. Here experience of God as impersonal and experience of God as personal are combined, with neither being reducible to the other, any more than we can say of a human that she or he is a person but not a body. If the object on the path actually *is* a snake, it does not lose the substantive inanimate properties one presumed it to have in mistaking it for a rope. It still takes up space, has length and width, weight, and so on. Those perceptions remain valid perceptions. Similarly, a human person has impersonal dimensions (physiological and physical properties) and personal ones. We may experience one to the near exclusion of the other, but neither is simply an imperfect form of the other. We could say that the *saguna/nirguna* distinction narrows the complexity of the actual features of the divine ultimate. Personalistic theism affirms more thorough validity for both types of religious experience. If we accept Gellman's criterion that we should prefer an account that rationally saves the greatest referential value for the largest number of religious experiences, this is clearly a strong recommendation for such theism.

This also points up a problem or at least a deep ambiguity in Hick's contention that we can with equal validity regard the one religious reality, 'the Real', as either impersonal or personal.[20] If this means that people are right to regard the Real as either solely and exclusively impersonal or solely and exclusively personal, then the statement tells us nothing except that it is acceptable for people to believe logically contradictory things about the same object, and any other contraries could be substituted for these in reference to the 'Real'. If Hick's contention means that there is an obligation of some sort on those who represent the Real in one of these ways to recognize validity in the alternative representation, then it would seem that a definite advantage attaches to personal representation of the Real, since it includes intrinsic impersonal dimensions while the reverse is not true. In fact, however, Hick's interpretation of his maxim takes impersonality as the baseline.[21] Despite the apparent even-handedness of the contention that both impersonal and personal representations of the Real are valid, careful reflection leads us to recognize inescapable asymmetries. First, Hick deploys this 'neutral' claim in a manner characteristic of those particular religious perspectives that regard a personalistic view of the divine as a subordinate form for apprehending an impersonal reality. Second, the personalistic view can affirm the validity of 'impersonal' religious experience in a way (as true experience of real aspects of the

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divine nature) that no impersonalistic view can reciprocally affirm the validity of experience of a personal God.

Gellman's discussion of religious experience is very suggestive in a further respect. In discussions of religious pluralism, religious ends are often treated in a manner analogous to the treatment of religious experience. Ostensible diversity among religious fulfilments is viewed as a possible challenge to the reality of any religious fulfilment, just as differences among religious experiences might be thought to undercut the validity we can attribute to any religious experience. If people disagree about the religious ultimate they seek or experience, perhaps the notion of a religious ultimate is itself confused and none actually exists. If people disagree about religious ends, they cast doubt on the reality of any religious end. The problems are similar, and so are the responses.

For instance, *nirvana* and communion with God are not compatible accounts of the same state. If we take them seriously as alternatives, we may be told there are only three options: (1) All such faith in religious ends is nonsense; (2) one end is real and all others illusory or unattainable; or (3) the true content of religion, the true end, is some unknown positive condition on a plane far above such contradictions. Since in his view, recourse to either of the first two options would render any idea of religious fulfilment implausible, Hick opts for the third. He maintains that the varied accounts of religious ends are all conditioned, anticipations (expressed with misplaced concreteness) of a final human condition that is beyond description by any such account.

I believe that Gellman's basic principles for religious experience hold here as well: the best accounts of the varied reports of religious ends will be those that preserve the highest degree of concrete validity in the largest number of them. Religious fulfilments as human states can be viewed under the broad heading of religious experience, after all. It is precipitous to conclude that because religious experiences are diverse, the only way to salvage their validity is to deny that *any* of their particulars are true and instead insist that they be packaged as unanimous evidence for an ultimate beyond description. Likewise it is precipitous to conclude that because religious aims plainly differ, the only way to salvage plausibility for the attainment of any religious end at all is to imagine an end indeterminate enough to be symbolically represented in these conflicting ways.

If we grant the reality of diverse religious ends, 'conflicting' religious testimony need not be discounted. Instead, the testimony may be essentially valid description of different conditions of religious fulfilment. The fact that believers report accurately about varied religious ends does not undercut the trustworthiness of religious experience as evidence. Nor does it require that the varying religious traditions reject each other's accounts as false and baseless. Each tradition may have its own 'inclusivist' means to assimilate and affirm the validity of most of the other's testimony. Two contending scientific theories or schools of thought may be in agreement about nearly all of the relevant experimental data, and yet at odds

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about the nature of the reality it reflects. This 'contradiction' in accounts does not throw into doubt the validity of the mass of the evidence, the vast majority of which may be viewed as counting for both sides. The disagreement between the two scientific theories does not justify the conclusion that neither can be right. The evidence instead provides good reason to suppose that one of the two will eventually prove a more adequate account, able to incorporate the largest possible area of overlap in the empirical or experimental descriptions of reality given in the two competing interpretations. From this perspective, a religion bolsters its own cognitive legitimacy by finding as much concrete truth as possible in others' affirmations.

Multiple religious ends and the value of religious testimony

Liberal and conservative theological extremes share a largely undefended assumption that there is and can be only one religious end, one actual religious fulfilment.[22] This assumption reigns across the theological spectrum, where debate focuses on the nature of that single end and the means by which it may be achieved: one way or many ways.[23] Both the 'one way' and the 'many ways' standpoints are committed to downplay the particular claims and aims of the religions. The first view downplays them in all religions but one; the second view downplays them in all religions without exception, in favour of one particular philosophical claim about religion. In both cases, there is no specific connection between the concrete particularities of a religion and the end its adherents may attain. On the face of it, this is an odd conviction, since one thing that religious traditions seem to agree about is that the ends they seek are closely linked with the distinctive ways of life that they prescribe.

We can save the validity of a great deal of the particular testimony of the religions, the qualities that make each substantively unique, if we entertain the possibility that religious paths in fact lead persons to the distinctively varied states that they advertise and on which they set supreme value. A famous verse of the *Bhagavad-gita* is often quoted on the presumption that it indicates the identical goal of all religions: 'In whatsoever way men approach me, in that same way I receive them.'[24] But Krishna's declaration in the voice of supreme *brahman* appears an equally good charter for a diversity of religious ends, affirming that people's realizations will differ corresponding to their different approaches to ultimate reality. In whatever way persons approach the ultimate, in *that* way will they be received, and not in the way that another might be.

If different religious practices and beliefs in fact aim at and constitute distinct conditions of human fulfilment, then a very high proportion of what each tradition affirms may be true and valid, in very much the terms that the tradition claims. This allows us to affirm, as religiously significant, a much larger proportion of the *distinctive* testimony of the various faith traditions. In particular, we may affirm as

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truthful accounts of religious experience that testify to different, even mutually exclusive human conditions. This is so even if deep conflict remains between the religions regarding priorities, background beliefs and ultimate metaphysical reality. Two religious ends may represent two human states that it is utterly impossible for one person to inhabit at the same time. But there is no contradiction in two different persons simultaneously attaining the two 'conflicting' ends. Adherents of different religious traditions may be able to recognize the reality of both ends, though they are not able to agree on the explanation of how and why the two ends exist or on what priority they should be given. Therefore they could agree on the value of the experiential evidence pointing to the reality of these ends.

A religious end or aim is defined by a set of practices, images, stories, and concepts that has three characteristics. First, the set provides material for a thorough pattern of life. The ultimacy often spoken of in definitions of religion is here given a quite concrete meaning. The religious end and the path that leads to it do not address only a limited dimension of life or one particular human need among others. They provide a framework that encompasses all the features of life, practical and sublime, current and future.

Second, at least some of the elements in the set are understood to be *constitutive* of a final human fulfilment and/or to be the sole means of achieving that fulfilment. For instance, for Christians, there is a texture of such elements making reference to Jesus Christ. Relation with Christ is believed to be integral to the deepest human fulfilment itself. Some Buddhists may maintain that all the teachings and instruments used to follow the *dharma* way are ultimately dispensable, even the eight-fold path itself. But they can only be discarded *after* use, and nothing else is fit to serve the same purpose. One may pass beyond them, but exclusively through dependence on them.

Third, for any individual or community the religious pattern is in practice exclusive of at least some alternative options. Living in accord with the set of stories and practices necessarily involves choices. 'The ascetic life leads to peace' and 'the sensual life leads to joy' may both be true reports. But we can practise the observance of one more comprehensively only at the expense of the other. For our purposes it makes no difference that there may be yet an additional claim that some particular combined practice of asceticism/sensuality will lead to peace *and* joy. This is itself a practice which, if followed, rules out either of the other two paths in their particularity. There is a distinct purity to an exclusive ascetic path or an exclusive sensual path. A path that is some determinate mix of the two excludes either of those other distinctive ends.

The relations among religious ends are, then, as diverse as the ends themselves. Some fulfilments may be similar enough that the paths associated with them reinforce each other to some degree, as typing and piano playing may both train the fingers. Other ends may simply pose no direct obstacle, one to the other, save the intrinsic division of finite time and effort needed to pursue both, like marathon

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running and single parenthood. Yet other ends are so sharply divergent that a decisive step in the direction of one is a move away from the other: strict non-violence, and participation in armed revolution. It is obvious that there may be many goods or secondary goals that overlap on the paths to different religious realizations. Discipline is a quality essential to learning the piano or a new language. It is connected with both these different ends, but it is not identical with either of them. If discipline itself were the primary aim, then music or a language would themselves become instrumental means and not ends at all. What for some is an instrument is for others an end.

There is an interesting dynamic balance in the relation of religious ends. The more similar the aims, the more sharply contention arises over whether one path should supersede another. If the aims are nearly identical, this tendency is very powerful. To take a trivial example, if the end in view is word processing, few would not take sides between computers or typewriters as the more adequate tools. It is also true that in the case of such convergent goals, the common features of the religious aims provide a compensatory shared ground on which to struggle and work toward agreement, a set of shared criteria. On the other hand, the more incommensurable religious ends appear, the less they contend for the same space. Losing weight and learning Spanish are separate aims with their distinct requirements. Though they have less concretely in common, there is a proportionally smaller impetus to substitute one for the other. These dynamics are key elements in understanding religious conflict and the possibilities for mutual understanding.

The religious goal sought by any religious community is integrally related to a comprehensive pattern of life. A particular religious tradition would regard someone as fulfilled or liberated whose life had been most fully shaped by the distinctive pattern it fosters. Religious ends are not extrinsic awards granted for unrelated performances, like trips to Hawaii won in lotteries. To take a Buddhist example, no-one is unhappy in *nirvana* or arrives at it unready. This is because the state of cessation is an achievement life on the right path makes possible. The end is not enjoyed until a person becomes what the path to the end makes her or him.[25] The way and the end are one.

In its simplest form, the hypothesis of multiple religious ends requires only that the nature of reality be such as to allow humans to phenomenally realize varied religious goals. Obviously, the universe does have some determinate character, and the realization of diverse ends takes place within a single order. One or more of the religions may, in fact, offer descriptions of that order that are substantially more accurate than the others. We cannot consistently affirm each religion's claim to tell the full and final truth about that order. An irreducible choice remains, and each faith will rightly advocate the world view within which its religious end is situated and the evaluative ultimacy of that end.[26] On this level, we can 'save the particulars', not by simultaneously affirming all these accounts to be true, but by recognizing them as constituting real candidates for truth in their particularity (as

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opposed to relegating them all to the category of metaphor). Even though these metaphysical differences cannot be definitively resolved, I have tried to indicate how my approach makes it possible to 'save the particulars' in religions concretely, up to and including the particularity of religious ends. For instance, even if the Buddhist account of dependent co-arising is not an accurate metaphysical description of the inner nature of the world (which turns out to be better described in a Christian account), yet an experiential religious fulfilment described by the category of *nirvana* may be an actual human possibility. Even if there is neither a triune, eternal God nor a created universe (and the universe turns out to be better described in Buddhist categories), Christians might actually experience communion with a personal divine being. Christians would have their own explanations of the first case and Buddhists their own explanations of the second.

The hypothesis of multiple religious ends affirms the reality of different experiential states of religious fulfilment. It does not require that all of the elements a tradition associates with attainment of that state are also empirically true. One religious fulfilment may be associated in its tradition with affirmation of the eternity of the universe, another with affirmation of the creation of the universe. One may be associated with a theory of the self and another with a theory of the no-self. To regard the religious fulfilments as real does not entail accepting in their entirety both sides of these oppositions. The universe is no less a universe if it allows persons to achieve different destinies within it. The simultaneous fulfilment of Buddhist and Christian expectations, for instance, does not imply some ontological incoherence, unless one assumes that reality must necessarily finally compel our construals of it and appropriations of it to become fully uniform.

Recognition of diverse religious ends is the condition for recognition of the decisive significance of our religious choices and development, a significance that the particularistic witness of the individual religions collectively affirm. We can expect a fulfilment in line with the 'one and only' path that leads us to it. Our religious choices, practices and formation do determine distinct religious fulfilments in this life and in the next as well. There is no cogent reason to assume that all of us – the vast majority against their prior conditioning and desires – will experience only one among these religious ends or some undefined condition beyond any of them. We may readily pose this question in terms of postmortem destinies. But the point holds also if we consider religious diversity entirely in an earthly frame. Indeed, one of the recommendations of my approach is the way in which it envisions some consistency in the way religious ends are achieved in the historical realm and in any transhistorical realm. Whether in an eschatological future, or here and now, our conditions of religious fulfilment are significantly constituted by the expectations, relations, images, and practices that we bring to them. In the characteristic religious dialectic, as we progress toward the realization of an aim, we at the same time develop an ever deeper and clearer desire for that end itself above all others. Finally, religious consummation is the entrance into a

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state of fulfilment by one whose aspiration has been so tuned and shaped by particular anticipations of that state, and by anticipatory participation in aspects of that state, that this end represents the perfect marriage of desire and actuality.

Despite John Hick's contention that there is and can be only a single ultimate religious end, his own vision of eschatology appears to expect that the experiences of a world to come could only be taken by the human subjects involved as concrete confirmation of *particular* religious expectations.[27] He emphasizes that postmortem experiences of human consciousness would bear the shape of the categories an individual's history had provided for them. To take one of his examples, experience of communion with a personal God and a risen Jesus would confirm a Christian's expectations beyond a reasonable doubt. If in fact such events are significantly conditioned by our prior practice and commitment, then it would seem there is good reason to credit the 'one and only' testimony of various religious traditions. It is unlikely that one can attain to an end in any other manner than by following the way that aims at or near it in preference to other possibilities.

The hypothesis of multiple religious ends presumes an open set of religious ends available for realization both within the historical horizon of human life and beyond it. The historical and eschatological sets may differ. For instance, some religious fulfilments that appear irreducibly distinct within the historical frame may ultimately collapse together in some future state. But this hypothesis does not presume that all faith fulfilments do in fact reduce to one. The hypothesis of multiple religious ends impels us to take the testimony of the traditions and their believers with great seriousness. Though this approach affirms the value of confessional witness, it indicates that more than one faith tradition may be correct in claiming to offer a distinctive human religious fulfilment. It relativizes any single tradition not by the dubious claim to impose a philosophical interpretation from an absolute vantage point above that possible for any actual religion, but precisely by the actual validity of other religious traditions themselves.

A second notable feature of this hypothesis is the manner in which it deals directly with the cultural and historical conditioning of all religious life. Some interpreters put extreme stress on this conditioning, disparaging the capacity of any religious tradition to offer a distinctive, universal truth for all people. If we are to maintain any consistency in the way we treat religious topics and the way we deal with other issues, it seems we ought to recognize that human knowledge and experience are partially constituted by the contexts and categories we bring to them.[28] This includes the experience of religious fulfilment, both now and in the ultimate future. We noted earlier that these considerations lead those who would appeal to religious experience to shy away from its particularistic elements, whose conditioned character is taken to impeach their evidential value. But in acknowledging the role conditioning can play in constituting various religious ends, we find the evidential value of those particular aspects of such testimony is enhanced.

Religious ends are not conditions that obtain in some absolute realm outside

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the parameters of humanity itself. We cannot posit some event that would be experienced as having the identical content and the identical meaning by persons who come to it with entirely different expectations, formation and categories. It is interesting that such 'blinding revelation', wiping out all the mediating structures that have been built up in a person's distinct culture, tradition and personality, is often an axiomatic end point in both very conservative and very liberal theologies of religion. But any revelation consistent with humanity as we know it will condescend to the conditions of our knowing (even if stretching those conditions), not violate them. Revelation in history has to do precisely with God's acts to provide 'preconceptions' we could not otherwise bring as constitutive elements of experience.

Saving the particulars

As a Christian, it appears to me to make perfectly good sense to say two kinds of things. The first is to affirm that another religion is a true and valid path to the religious fulfilment it seeks – to agree with the Dalai Lama, for instance, when he says there is no way to enlightenment but the Buddhist way.[29] The second is to affirm what the book of Acts says of Jesus Christ, that 'there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved' (Acts 4.12). There is a relation with God and other creatures made possible in Christ that can only be realized in communion with Christ.

On these terms, a tradition can acknowledge the *reality* of the religious end sought by another, in terms largely consistent with those used by that tradition itself. After describing the Buddhist end, the Dalai Lama says,

> **According to certain religions, however, salvation is a place, a beautiful paradise, like a peaceful valley. To attain such a state as this, to achieve such a state of *moksha*, does not require the practice of emptiness, the understanding of reality. In Buddhism itself, we believe that through the accumulation of merit one can obtain rebirth in heavenly paradises like the Tushita.**[30]

The Christian end, then, is classified as something like one of the pleasant interludes that Buddhists may enjoy between births as a reward for merit on their path toward true release. As a kind of mirror image, consider the statement of a Christian theologian:

> **Buddhists do not attain Christian salvation, since their Way does not lead to that personal relationship with God which is salvation. They attain a high degree of compassion and inner peace; and their unselfish devotion to the truth as they see it will surely fit them to receive salvation from a personal God when his saving activity becomes clear to them.**[31]

The Buddhist end is classified as a kind of compassionate selflessness that would be an appropriate preparation for relation with God. In both cases, the other religion's end is viewed in a moderately positive light as a penultimate condition, but viewed as loss if made a final goal.

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Each view recognizes the distinctive reality of the other's religious end, and so recognizes a diversity of religious ends. Each regards the other's goal as penultimate, leaving open the further possibility of transformation. There is no necessary contradiction in these two accounts of possible human ends, though there is a decisive divergence in their evaluative frameworks for these ends and there are contradictions in the metaphysical assumptions associated with each framework. Both accounts could be flatly wrong. But there is no logical reason that both cannot be descriptively correct in identifying two distinct options. In fact, if one of the writer's characterizations is correct, it implies a very substantial measure of truth in the other. Accepting different religious ends allows for mutual recognition of extensive *concrete* substantive truth in another tradition. Ironically, this degree of mutual agreement is ruled out by those who insist on one truth in all religions and so insist the Buddhist end and the Christian one must be identical.

Pluralism looks real. The best explanation for this appearance turns out to be that it is real. Even if there is one truly ultimate religious reality, there is no reason that human beings might not attach themselves to some lesser power or entity, give that power final priority in their lives, and so realize some end commensurate with that relation. From one point of view this could be called 'idolatry', but it does not follow that idolatry is without its own rewards. Suppose, for instance, that the one religious ultimate were as it is described in Buddhist tradition. Even within that tradition, it has been common to acknowledge that there may well be divine powers ('gods') with whom humans might have interactions, leading to certain results. Buddhist iconography is rich in heavens and hells, with attendant divine and demonic figures. These are all given penultimate status in the larger Buddhist religious scheme, but they are recognized as real conditions.

In its simple form, the hypothesis of multiple religious ends is not committed to any particular view of the religious ultimate or even to the principle that there must be one fully perfect and all-powerful ultimate. All that is required is that the universe have the objective features necessary for at least some of the religious fulfilments proposed in the varied religious traditions to be real human possibilities. But if there is one religious ultimate, as I think reasonable, alternative religious ends need not all be understood as devotion to lesser objects. They could be understood as particular kinds of relation with a complex religious ultimate.[32] Variety in religious goals would result not just because some people establish a primary religious relationship to something other than the religious ultimate, but because there are distinctly different ways to relate to that ultimate. The first part of this paper made the case that the particular testimony of religious experience could be credited without undercutting its reference to a determinate religious object, if that object were understood to have a complex nature. In this section I have argued that the hypothesis of a variety of religious ends saves the evidential value of the greatest possible volume of particularistic testimony from religious experience and at the same time corresponds well with a complex religious object.

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This approach differs from the polytheistic one, where virtually all particularistic testimony is validated because referred to a spectrum of different religious objects with corresponding different ends. It differs also from versions of the pluralistic hypothesis, where virtually all particularistic testimony is invalidated because referred to one religious object and one possible religious end. Instead, I have suggested one complex religious object and a variety of religious ends, saving the greatest extent of particular testimony consistent with continuing controversy over ultimate metaphysical order

The supposed incompatibility of religious experiences provides no cogent objection to the existence of one religious ultimate or to religious claims for one supreme religious end, so long as religious claims incorporate two auxiliary propositions. The first affirms the existence of a variety of actual religious ends (which their seekers may regard as supreme). The conflict in religious experiences is not a logical contradiction but a reflection of a practical incompatibility: no one person or community can realize contrasting priorities in religious experience at the same time. *Nirvana* and communion with God are contradictory only if we assume that one or the other must be the sole possible fate for all human beings. It is reasonable to hold that mutually exclusive states can both be actual for different subjects and so accurately reported by 'conflicting' religious accounts.

The second proposition affirms that the religious ultimate is sufficiently complex to sustain varied but valid perceptions and relations. Gellman's argument shows us that contrasting particulars in descriptions of the religious object drawn from religious experiences need not amount to contradictions or cancel the cognitive value of such experiences, provided that the nature of the religious object authentically grounds these particulars. Such grounding does not mean that one particular may be seen as a symbolic approximation of the literal truth of another particular. It requires that each is concretely true of permanent aspects of the religious object, as for instance the impersonal particulars of molecules and mass remain concretely true of a human being at the same time that personal particulars of social roles and consciousness are concretely true features of that same human being.

On the one hand these conclusions bolster the case for the veridical character of religious experience. On the other hand, they provide a critical standard for the types of religion that can most effectively claim the benefits of that case. Only those forms of religion can do so that are willing to recognize the reality of a diversity of religious ends and that posit intrinsic complexity in the character of the religious ultimate they affirm.[33]

Notes

1. William L. Rowe 'Religious pluralism', *Religious Studies*, **35** (1999), 139–150. See the reply in John Hick 'Ineffability', *Religious Studies*, **36** (2000), 35–46.

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2. For a fuller discussion see S. Mark Heim 'The pluralistic hypothesis, realism and post-eschatology', *Religious Studies*, **28** (1992), 207–219.
3. John Hick *An Interpretation of Religion*: *Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 240. A similar perspective is worked out in S. J. Samartha *One Christ, Many Religions*: *Toward a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1991).
4. Samartha *One Christ, Many Religions*, 83.
5. Hick *Interpretation of Religion*, 228.
6. *Ibid*., 233–236.
7. Chris L. Firestone 'Kant and religion: conflict or compromise?', *Religious Studies*, **35** (1999), 162.
8. This point is made in Jerome Gellman *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 115.
9. *Ibid*. Chapter 4 is devoted particularly to this issue.
10. *Ibid*., 102.
11. *Ibid*., 112.
12. *Ibid*., 101.
13. See John Braisted Carman *Majesty and Meekness*: *A Comparative Study of Contrast and Harmony in the Concept of God* (Grand Rapids MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1994) for an excellent discussion of this point.
14. Gellman *Experience of God*, 116.
15. *Ibid*., 117.
16. *Ibid*., 118.
17. Peter Byrne *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism*: *Reference and Realism in Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), ch. 5.
18. *Ibid*., 164.
19. Within Hindu tradition this hierarchical relation is maintained by Advaita Vedanta (whose great exponent was Śaṅkara) but at least partially questioned by another stream of thought, Visistadvaita (whose great exponent was Ramanuja).
20. See chs 14, 15 and 16 in Hick *Interpretation of Religion*.
21. See the criticism of Hick to this effect in Stephen Williams 'The Trinity and ''other religions''', in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.) *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*: *Theological Essays on Culture and Religion* (Grand Rapids MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 38. Hick rejects this and allied objections to his formulation. Hick contends that the Real is transcategorial, 'beyond characterization by the range of concepts available to human thought and embodied in our languages' and that his references to the Real are consistent with this contention; Hick 'Ineffability', 35.
22. For a fuller discussion see S. Mark Heim *Salvations*: *Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1995) chs 1–5. See also Grace M. Jantzen 'Human diversity and salvation in Christ', *Religious Studies*, **20** (1984), 579–580.
23. Alan Race's widely employed typology for theological approaches to religious pluralism (pluralism, inclusivism, exclusivism) is in fact based on this assumption. See Alan Race *Christians and Religious Pluralism*: *Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, 2nd edn (London: SCM Press, 1993).
24. *Bhagavad-gita* 4.11 This is the first half of v. 11. An alternative translation, including all of v. 11 is given by Anantanand Rambachan as 'Howsoever people approach Me, even so do I welcome them, for the paths people take from every side are Mine'; Anantanand Rambachan 'My God, your God, our God, no God?', *Current Dialogue*, **33** (1999), 39.
25. This paragraph paraphrases several points made by Joseph DiNoia in a very helpful discussion of religious aims. See Joseph Augustine DiNoia *The Diversity of Religions*: *A Christian Perspective* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 6–7, 56–58.
26. On apologetics, see Paul J. Griffiths *An Apology for Apologetics*: *A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1991).
27. Heim 'The pluralistic hypothesis', 39–40.
28. See Caroline Franks Davis *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), ch. 6, for a very helpful discussion of the necessary and legitimate role of mental models or 'cognitive sets' in perception. 'Preconceptions' are not only inextricable from most experience but play a crucial role in putting us in touch with specific aspects of reality in specific ways.
29. 'Liberation in which ''a mind that understands the sphere of reality annihilates all defilements in the sphere of reality'' is a state that only Buddhists can accomplish. This kind of *moksha* or *nirvana* is

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only explained in the Buddhist scriptures, and is achieved only through Buddhist practice.' Dalai Lama 'The Bodhgaya Interviews', in Paul J. Griffiths (ed.) *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 169.

30. *Ibid*., 169.
31. Keith Ward 'Truth and the diversity of religions', *Religious Studies*, **26** (1990), 16.
32. In a forthcoming book, I develop this specifically with regard to the Christian understanding of God as Trinity.
33. Major portions of this article are taken from a chapter in my forthcoming book, *The Depth of the Riches*: *A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000). I would like to thank Paul Griffiths for his comments on that manuscript.

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