



## Passional Reasoning and the Accessibility of Truth: William Wainwright on Arguing About Religion

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### Abstract



This essay presents William Wainwright's conception of religious reasoning. He rejects the view that proper reasoning in religion must be limited to "neutral technical reason" (NTR), modes of reasoning that are neutral and acceptable to all parties in a religious disagreement. He emphasizes that religious reasoning, as seen in outstanding practitioners from different religious traditions, incorporates additional elements, such as appeals to revelation, emphasis on religious reading, rhetoric, acknowledgment of mystery, and especially "passional reason," in which the arguments presented and the conclusions accepted depend essentially on the state of the reasoner's heart. The essay goes on to consider how Wainwright deals with issues surrounding religious diversity: he rejects all of the standard methods by which it has been argued that differences in belief between traditions either do not really exist or do not ultimately matter. Special attention is given to religious pluralism, as advocated by John Hick and Peter Byrne. This leads to a consideration of exclusivism, in which it is held that the fundamental doctrines of one religion are true, and those of other religions, insofar as they differ from those of the favored religion, are false. Wainwright finds the standard objections against exclusivism to be ineffective or inconclusive. Finally, the essay addresses a question suggested but not resolved by Wainwright's work: Does religious diversity have the consequence that truth in religion is not accessible to us?

### Keywords

William Wainwright, passional reasoning, William James, John Henry Newman, Jonathan Edwards, religious diversity, pluralism, exclusivism, John Hick.

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## Abstract

A persistent theme in William Wainwright's philosophical work has been the topic of reasoning concerning God and religion. He has been concerned with how we should, and how we in fact do, proceed in such reasoning. For Wainwright, how we *should* reason and how we *do in fact* reason are closely connected, since he accords considerable authority to persons who are widely recognized as experts in this sort of reasoning. His reflections are informed by an unusually broad and deep knowledge, not only of various Christian traditions, but of other religious traditions as well, including Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. This theme surfaces in a number of his writings over many years, but a climax is reached in his 2016 book, *Reason, Revelation, and Devotion: Inference and Argument in Religion*.<sup>1 2</sup> This essay will present some of Wainwright's main conclusions, as found in that book, and will go on to discuss a question that is raised by his work but which he does not specifically address.

It is not easy to provide a concise, informative summary of the positive conclusions reached in Wainwright's book, for reasons which will become evident. However, it is possible to state very concisely the view concerning religious reasoning to which he is opposed. This is the view that affirms the preeminence of what will be termed here *neutral technical reason* (NTR). The view asserts that proper reasoning about religion must be "neutral" in the sense that it is based on assumptions and modes of reasoning which are in principle, and so far as possible in practice, accepted by all sides of the questions in dispute. This reasoning will, naturally, make extensive use of technical methods such as those developed in deductive and inductive logic, as well as principles of explanation such as are employed in the natural sciences. The appeal of insisting that proper religious reasoning must be based on NTR is evident: insofar as this can be done, it offers the prospect of reaching conclusions that are acceptable to all who are concerned to reach the truth about religious matters. It is rightly regarded as a mark of excellence in the natural scientific disciplines that, in spite of vigorous and continuing debates, a consensus is eventually reached to the satisfaction of all concerned. The desire to reach a similar state of affairs in the study of religious matters is altogether understandable.

Wainwright does not, to be sure, decry the use of NTR in reasoning about God and religion. Where arguments of this sort are available, they are welcome, and many questions about religion can be resolved by such methods – especially, perhaps, historical questions. However, he is resolutely opposed to the idea that all acceptable reasoning about religion must be limited to NTR.

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1. Unless otherwise noted, page references in the text are to this volume.

2. And also see wainwright, 2020.

The problem is not merely that NTR fails to deliver on the promise of reaching generally agreed conclusions about basic religious questions. This, after all, is a failure that is shared by any and all forms of reasoning about such matters; it is not unique to NTR. The problem, however, is that limiting religious reasoning to NTR excludes a great deal that is properly included in such reasoning, as is seen in noted practitioners of religious reasoning in many different communities of faith. Wainwright's goal, then, is to set out a richer and more inclusive conception of religious reasoning, one that does justice to the actual practice of such reasoning as it occurs in a wide range of settings.

Early in his book, Wainwright sets out the reasons why many arguments concerning God and religion are, in George Mavrodes' terminology, "person-relative." That is, these arguments, even though they may be sound, with true conclusions validly derived from true premises, fail to be convincing, and in many cases, do not succeed in leading persons to a knowledge of the truth of their conclusions. The reasons why this is so are various; Wainwright observes,

Proofs are relative to persons because they differ in education, training, and intelligence; because they differ in their spatiotemporal location or the information available to them; or because they differ in purpose or in the state of their hearts. Many of these differences are epistemically innocent... . Other differences are less obviously so. It is arguable, for instance, that *all* men and women *ought* to exhibit the dispositions and motions of the heart needed to reason rightly about moral matters and things of religion, or to share certain purposes. If they should, then any person-relativity derived from variations in purpose or in dispositions of the heart ought not to exist; and (other things being equal) proofs whose cogency and convincingness depend on having the right dispositions or sharing the right purposes *should* be cogent and convincing to everyone who can understand them (Wainwright, 2016, p. 47).<sup>1</sup>

1. This claim leads Wainwright to differ from Mavrodes concerning the person-relativity of proofs. Mavrodes views most if not all proofs in religion as being person-relative. Wainwright, however, disputes this. A major source of person-relativity in religious argument is that persons "differ in purpose or in the state of their hearts." But if, as Wainwright believes to be the case, "*all* men and women *ought* to exhibit the dispositions and motions of the heart needed to reason rightly about moral matters and things of religion, or to share certain purposes," then the fact that some do not, in fact, feel and think as they ought in such matters is no bar to things being proved in a way that is not person-relative. I do not think this way of talking is helpful. As we generally speak of "proof," a proof is a specimen of reasoning that decisively settles a certain matter, at least within the appropriate context. If, however, we speak of "proof" in an unqualified sense where the preconditions for the success of an argument are themselves matters in dispute, the usefulness of speaking about proof at all becomes questionable.

In spite of this, however, all of the factors conducive to the person-relativity of religious arguments do in fact exist, and indeed are quite prevalent. And one result of this fact is that those who are concerned to make their arguments convincing will move beyond the limits of NTR to employ other resources in their religious reasoning. Each of the main chapters that follow explores in detail one of these additional resources. They are, in order, Religious Reading, Passional Reasoning, Rhetoric, Revelation, and Mystery. Each of these topics designates resources that do, in fact, in various instances, enhance the effectiveness of religious arguments that have been offered. Interestingly, each of them also (with a single partial exception) tends to deepen the separation between alternative religious and philosophical worldviews, and to lessen the likelihood that proponents of different worldviews will be able to come to an agreement concerning which arguments they find compelling and which conclusions they accept as being true.

### Mystery

The one partial exception to the generalization just offered is the theme of mystery. Many (but not all) accounts of the divine emphasize to a greater or lesser degree its mysterious nature. Assertions of divine mystery do not in themselves, to be sure, automatically result in agreement or convergence between views that make such assertions. However, they do tend to leave their adherents less inclined to assume that their own views capture everything there is to know concerning God, or the divine, and by the same token less inclined to assume that there can be no truth whatsoever in views that differ from the favored one. It may be, then, that an emphasis on mystery encourages a greater degree of toleration among adherents of diverse views than would otherwise obtain.

Wainwright himself is favorable to an emphasis on mystery and considers it unfortunate that mystery tends to be downplayed in much contemporary philosophy of religion. (He notes, perhaps with a bit of chagrin, that *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Wainwright himself, has only a single reference to “mystery” in its index!) His most striking conclusion concerning mystery is that God may very well find aspects of his own nature mysterious, not because God is epistemically deficient but because those aspects transcend anything that can be captured in concepts, even divine concepts. That is to say, “God’s nature is for him an object of an amazement, wonder, and awe that are the felt aspects, as it were, of a perfect experiential acquaintance with depths of his own being that necessarily elude even his own complete conceptual comprehension” (Wainwright, 2016, p. 147).

## Revelation

Whereas mystery may to some extent tend to soften the disagreements between religious worldviews, revelation brings those disagreements into stark relief. All major religious views depend to some extent on alleged revelations,<sup>1</sup> and these revelations bring to the fore the differences separating a given religion from its competitors. The resulting conflicts of beliefs are addressed by Wainwright in other places and will be considered further later in this essay. In the chapter on revelation in *Reason, Revelation, and Devotion*, he concerns himself mainly with the perennial problem of faith and reason: to what extent does revelation set limits to what can be achieved by reason, and to what extent are they compatible? Wainwright focuses primarily on Christian accounts of this relationship and concludes that while revelation goes beyond what can be known through reason alone, the two need not be ultimately incompatible. He argues at some length for the inadequacy of the deistic view, according to which revelation at most re-publishes, in a more accessible form, truths that are ultimately knowable by unaided reason.

## Rhetoric

Unlike the multiple incompatible revelations, rhetoric is in principle available indiscriminately to all religious worldviews. However, there is a long tradition in philosophy of disparaging rhetoric, which aims at the pleasure of readers or listeners, in contrast to philosophy, which aims at truth. Often rhetoric is accorded a secondary role: after reason has established the truth, rhetoric is allowed in order to make that truth more palatable to the hearers. Wainwright is not satisfied with this; he argues for a seamless relationship between the two. He states, “Example, praise and dispraise, imaginative and emotional appeals – rhetoric, in short – play an essential role in the practice of philosophy and theology because they are needed to inculcate and reinforce the intellectual, ethical, and spiritual values that suffuse good reasoning” (Wainwright, 2016, p. 92). He argues, furthermore, that “metaphor and analogy (and thus rhetoric) are essential to philosophy in a way in which they are not essential to science” (Wainwright, 2016, p. 95).

An interesting feature of this discussion is that Wainwright himself only infrequently indulges in rhetorical appeals. (One exceptional example occurs in his advocacy, as noted above, of the view that God may be a source of

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1. Buddhism is only an apparent exception. Wainwright notes that in theory “the Buddha’s teachings can be authenticated by argument and one’s own experience. But in practice, the Buddhist sutras are treated as revelation” (164, n. 24).

wonder and amazement for himself.) For the most, part Wainwright pays his readers the compliment of assuming that they will follow his reasoning, without much assistance from rhetorical embellishment.

Finally, it should be noted that, while the resources of rhetoric are available to all, the effects of particular instances of rhetoric will not be neutral as between differing worldviews. On the contrary: insofar as rhetoric takes the form of imaginative and emotional appeals that favor the assumptions underlying a particular view, these appeals have the effect of strengthening that view in comparison with others. Think of the immense influence that has been exerted, over many centuries, by Plato's allegory of the cave.

### **Religious Reading**

The title of this section turns out to be somewhat misleading, for an interesting reason. Throughout much of history, it could not be assumed that all or almost all religious believers were able to read. In the Roman Empire, it is estimated that only 15% or so of Christians were literate, and in some other times and places, the proportion was even smaller. The result of this was a heavy emphasis on memory, unlike our present society when it is generally assumed that memorization is unnecessary, so long as the desired material is readily available in a database. (But whether this is an adequate substitute is very much in question. It somehow does not have the right ring to say, "Thy word have I hid in my iPad, that I might not sin against Thee.") Wainwright cites numerous examples, from a variety of traditions, of exhortations to the faithful to memorize, meditate upon, and in general internalize the crucial contents of the sacred writings of the respective traditions. It can hardly be doubted that following these exhortations tends to bring adherents into better conformity to the religious ways of life valorized in those traditions. However, the practices of religious reading have another effect as well. Following John Clayton, Wainwright states, "reading traditions inflect their participants' understanding of what is and is not rational" (2016, p. 51). For key figures such as Ghazali, Udayana, and Anselm, "their traditions affect what they regard as good reasons" (Wainwright, 2016, p. 51). So for religious reading as for rhetoric, the influence of this practice is rather to amplify than to diminish the differences between competing religious visions.

### **Passional Reasoning**

Pretty clearly, the centerpiece of Wainwright's account of religious reasoning is found in what he terms "passional reasoning," the "reasons of the heart" that underlie both religious commitment and much religious argumentation. This is

the only one of these topics to which he has devoted an entire book, *Reason and the Heart* (1995). In the present volume, the topic is represented in discussions of four different thinkers: Jonathan Edwards, John Henry Newman, William James, and the Neo-Confucian Wang Yangmin. I consider briefly the first three of these, in reverse order.<sup>1</sup> (I do not discuss Wang Yangmin, because I have too little knowledge of his ideas in their cultural context to enable me to make useful comments.)

### **William James**

William James devotes a considerable amount of attention to the intimate involvement of our emotional concerns and impulses in our thinking generally. A key locus for this topic is his essay, “The Will to Believe,” which he later admitted had been better entitled, “The Right to Believe.” The main idea here is that, in matters that are not decisively settled by objective reason (we might say, by NTR), it is entirely legitimate and reasonable to allow our beliefs to be influenced and guided by our interests – by what matters to us, what we care about. Wainwright points out that James clearly is assuming “some sort of congruence between the mind’s structure and the structure of reality” (Wainwright, 1995, p. 74). This assumption is one that tends to be congenial to a religious viewpoint, but less so to a purely scientific perspective. James, educated in the sciences, always wants to give science its due, while at the same time resisting the pressure to give it the last word about reality. His “ultimate criterion,” according to Wainwright, is “the normal human mind or, more accurately, what the normal human mind finds satisfactory in the long run and on the whole” (Wainwright, 1995, p. 74).

Two areas in which James’ own passional nature exerted a decisive influence on his conclusions are the metaphysical issues of monism vs. pluralism, and the freedom of the will. Monism – that is, absolute idealism – has the merit that it accords with a “generous vital enthusiasm about the universe” (Wainwright, 1995, p. 70). Furthermore, by taking responsibility for the outcome of things off our shoulders it enables us to take “moral holidays” – and who is not the better for a good holiday now and then? But pluralism – the view that there are multiple centers of power and influence in the universe, and not a single, all-controlling one – has other, and greater, merits. Pluralism “places great importance on human moral capacities” (Wainwright, 1995, p. 71); it accords with days on which, in James’ words, we are “in full and

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1. Chapter 1 of *Reason and the Heart* is devoted to Edwards, chapter 2 to Newman, and chapter 3 to James.

successful exercise of our moral energy.” Pluralism as James conceives it is inevitably associated with free will in the libertarian sense. A crisis early in James’ own life was resolved when, contemplating the idea of free will in contrast with the scientific determinism to which he had previously been inclined, he resolved that his first act of free will should be to affirm belief in free will! In Wainwright’s summary, James rejects determinism “because it violates his ‘sense of moral reality,’ is a ‘corruption of our moral sanity,’ and runs afoul of ‘instinctive reactions,’ which he ‘for one will not tamper with’” (Wainwright, 1995, p. 73).

James also puts forward, and defends, a “religious hypothesis” that has three parts:

1. There is a “higher universe.”
2. We are better off if we believe this and act accordingly.
3. Communion with the higher universe “is a process wherein work is really done,” and effects are produced in the visible world (Wainwright, 1995, p. 71).<sup>1</sup>

### **John Henry Newman**

John Henry Newman introduces into the discussion the notion of an “illative sense.” This is a faculty of informal judgment which operates in all of our thinking. In particular, it establishes for us the prior probabilities of various propositions, our judgments of their likelihood of being true before we have given them special attention. The illative sense is active in our construction of arguments, as well as in our evaluation of an argument’s overall force. The operation of the illative sense is evident, for example, in the deliberations of historians, as they consider various possible explanations of some historical event, the inherent plausibility of each explanation apart from specific evidence that may be offered, the reliability of various sources, the authority to be ascribed to tradition, and so on. An important point is that the illative sense cannot be replaced by explicit reasoning according to formal rules (that is, by NTR). Often the considerations taken account of are so subtle, even elusive, that any attempt to capture them in rules would be doomed to failure. On the contrary, our formal reasoning is itself dependent on the illative sense for what it requires in order to function, including the premises on which it operates and the rules of inference it follows. (If we could not tell straight off that *modus ponens* is a valid inference rule and that affirming the

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1. James also has a different, and slightly more specific, formulation of the religious hypothesis (see 1995, p. 71). Replacing the version given above with this one will not change any of the conclusions drawn here.

consequent is fallacious, we could not rely on propositional logic in our formal reasoning.)

Given the indispensable role played by the illative sense, it is a bit disconcerting to realize that it cannot in general be relied on to produce an agreement between different inquirers. This sense reflects in part “personal characteristics in which men are in fact in essential and irremediable variance with one another” (Wainwright, 1995, p. 67). Furthermore, “the intuitions, first principles, axioms, dictates of common sense, presumptions, presentiments, prepossessions, or prejudices” which we bring to a discussion reflect our varied individual experiences. In spite of this, however, Newman does not view our rational judgments as irredeemably subjective and relativistic. The illative sense can be used well or badly, and when it is used well, one will tend to find that “what convinces [oneself] does convince others also” (Wainwright, 1995, p. 67). Newman offers several criteria that will help us to know whether our illative powers are being well used. First, there is the evidence we have relied upon in reaching our conclusions. Second, there is “the agreement of many private judgments in one and the same view.” It is a good sign when our research is convergent with that of others, who may have begun from different starting points and with different sets of personal inclinations. It is also important that our solution results in the resolution of difficulties, and throws light on additional questions beyond the one that originally challenged us. Finally, there is the criterion of successful practice, when our conclusion is one that can be put into practice with discernable effects. (Here there is an evident overlap, albeit not intended on either side, with James’ pragmatism.) So while the illative sense is inherently subjective and personal, the merely subjective elements can be overcome with care and patience so as to arrive, in many cases, at conclusions that are widely acceptable and accepted.<sup>1</sup>

Wainwright summarizes by saying, “Newman’s contribution to the tradition that Edwards represents is his demonstration that the way in which the mind reasons when influenced by religious sentiments, images, and ideas is identical with the way in which it reasons on ordinary occasions... . For passional factors play a role in historical inquiry, philosophy, and everyday reasoning. If the way in which theists assess evidence is suspect, then so too is the way in which historians, philosophers, and ordinary practical reasoners do so, for the procedures of the latter are essentially the same” (Wainwright, 1995, p. 68f).

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1. I offer here the observation that I, as a Protestant, find Newman’s emphasis on the subjective and personal character of rational judgment highly congenial. For a staunch Roman Catholic such as Newman, the lack of a comparably strong emphasis on the authority of tradition is noticeable.

## Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards, writing earlier than either Newman or James, provides a striking emphasis on the importance of passional reasoning. Edwards notes that in our thinking we make use both of “actual ideas,” which are lively, clear, and distinct, and mere “signs” (words and images) which, so to speak, stand in for the actual ideas. Unfortunately, in our thinking about God the actual ideas are to a large extent missing.

Without the simple idea of “true beauty” (the radiance or splendor of true benevolence), we can’t understand God’s holiness and the facts that depend on it such as the infinite heinousness of sin (and the consequent necessity of atonement). And because we can’t properly understand ideas of affections if we haven’t experienced them, we can’t understand God’s benevolence if we aren’t benevolent ourselves... . [T]he truly benevolent delight in the benevolence in which holiness consists; that is, they “perceive” or “taste” or “relish” its beauty. Edwards’s claim, then, is that to reason accurately about God one must possess an actual idea of God, and to have that one must be truly benevolent (Wainwright, 1995, p. 61).

It follows from this that a person’s disposition and affections have large epistemological implications; they are essential to the “spiritual sense” which is important for enabling us to discern many truths about God. But there are two different ways in which the spiritual sense operates. “In the first, the spiritual sense enables us to recognize the truth of propositions that are logically or epistemically related to the excellence of divine things. For example, our apprehension of Christ’s beauty and excellency produces a conviction of his sufficiency as a mediator” (Wainwright, 1995, p. 62). But secondly, the spiritual sense “helps us grasp the truth of the gospel scheme as a whole. A conviction of the gospel’s truth is an inference from the beauty or excellency of what it depicts, namely, ‘God and Jesus Christ ... the work of redemption and the ways and works of God’” (Wainwright, 1995, p. 62). In this second sort of case, Wainwright points out, “the mind’s object is the content of the gospel as a whole – what Paul Ricoeur has called ‘the world of the text’” (Wainwright, 1995, p. 62).

Wainwright concludes his discussion of Edwards by considering reasons Edwards gives for trusting the deliverances of the spiritual sense -- presumably, reasons that are needed because for some of Edwards’s readers the spiritual sense is not functioning as well as might be desired. (If it were functioning in optimal fashion, its authority might be expected to be self-evident.)

## A Comparison

Without question, each of Wainwright's protagonists has offered persuasive reasons in support of the necessity of passional reasoning in religious matters. However, each has approached this topic independently, and their accounts are quite different from each other. This naturally invites a comparison between the three, as well as the question of whether their approaches are in the end compatible or incompatible.

The question of the compatibility of the methodologies of James, Newman, and Edwards is a rather subtle one, and one I am unable to pursue at length in this discussion. I will hazard the conjecture that Newman's and James's methods might turn out to be compatible on the whole, but considerable maneuvering might be needed in order to secure this result. Edwards, in contrast, seems to be pursuing a line of his own, and connecting his line of thought with the other two might prove challenging. But I will not take the space that would be required to work out these very tentative ideas.

With regard to their results, on the other hand, the differences are clear. Both Newman and Edwards would agree with what is asserted in James's "religious hypothesis" – roughly, that there is a higher world, and we can be in contact with it. But both of them would regard this as extremely thin and inadequate; not enough is being affirmed to be of much religious use for anyone. James, on the other hand, would undoubtedly regard the orthodox Christian theologies of Newman and Edwards as going far beyond anything he would find to be warranted. Newman and Edwards would naturally find quite a lot in common in their mutual affirmation of a broadly orthodox Christian perspective, but each would also find in the other's views a good deal that is subject to serious objections.

Of particular interest in this regard is Edwards' assertion that the spiritual sense enables us to "grasp the truth of the gospel scheme as a whole." To be sure, insofar as this amounts to "God and Jesus Christ ... the work of redemption and the ways and works of God," there is nothing that would surprise any orthodox Christian. But for Edwards, the gospel scheme involves more than this. As a Calvinist, he affirms a strict, universal divine determinism. (He championed the argument for the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and libertarian free will long before this argument was widely discussed.) This implies that the "beauty of true benevolence" will assure us of the justice of God's judgment, as expressed in the doctrines of unconditional election and reprobation. Furthermore, Edwards is "an occasionalist like Malebranche, a subjective idealist like Berkeley, and a mental phenomenalist like Hume" (Wainwright, 1995, p. 63). Possibly Edwards's occasionalism, idealism, and phenomenism could be considered merely as philosophical

elaborations, rather than as integral parts of the “gospel scheme.” (Though I suspect that working out such a distinction in Edwards’s corpus might prove to be a difficult task.) It is very doubtful, however, that divine determinism and the doctrine of predestination could be deleted from Edwards’s sense of the gospel scheme without leaving that scheme unrecognizable.

All this becomes problematic when we bring Wainwright’s own views into the picture. Wainwright has made a careful study of Edwards’s thought, and there is no doubt that he regards Edwards’s championing of the beauty of true benevolence as a valid and proper instance of passionate reasoning in religious matters. Wainwright, however, would not endorse any of the implications of Edwards’ views mentioned in the previous paragraph: divine determinism, occasionalism, idealism, and phenomenalism. This being the case, Wainwright must agree that even Edwards’s shining example of passionate reasoning cannot be relied upon to guide us to the truth in matters of religion. Recognition of the importance of such reasoning may be a requirement for a proper account of religious reasoning, but it does not and cannot provide a satisfactory basis for resolving religious disagreement.

### **Portrait of a Believer, and a Problem**

The account of religious reasoning set out by Wainwright provides us with the resources for a portrait of a prototypical religious believer. Such a believer will have accepted the revelation proffered by her religious tradition, and with it the doctrines that have been derived from that revelation. She will be very familiar with the “sacred reading” prescribed by that tradition, and will have internalized this material to the extent that it exerts an important formative influence on the conduct of her life. She will also, naturally, have absorbed the rhetorical presentations that correspond to the teachings and exhortations of that tradition. She will have a lively sense of the mysteriousness of the divine, yet without this mystery undermining for her the positive teachings about God and the divine that are embraced by her tradition.

There is however a particular set of facts, barely mentioned until now, that may have the effect of disturbing the confidence implied by our portrayal thus far. These are, broadly speaking, the facts concerning religious diversity. Of course, there is nothing new in the observation that different individuals, and especially different groups of people, find themselves confronted with others with whom they have religious disagreements. This has often led to mutual hostility between opposing camps. However, a good many reflective persons today find themselves in the following situation: They are forced to recognize that other religious communities contain persons who are very well versed in the objective, factual information concerning matters in question. These

persons are highly intelligent, are skilled reasoners, and are able to present forceful arguments in support of their own views. They also give every evidence of sincere religious devotion, as well as a genuine desire to arrive at a true understanding concerning spiritual matters. Where this is seen to be the case, it creates a demand to arrive at a satisfying understanding of the seemingly insurmountable differences that separate diverse religious views. There is, moreover, a great deal of pressure to find some way to hold that the intractable disagreements do not represent the final truth about the situation – that the disagreements, if they cannot be eliminated entirely, are somehow able to be transcended in a more ultimate truth.

Wainwright is, of course, keenly aware of this situation; his most concerted attempt to deal with it comes in his essay, “Competing Religious Claims” (2004).<sup>1</sup> In this essay he surveys and assesses the different ways that have been proposed to overcome the disagreements between competing religious worldviews. The response that denies that the conflicts are real comes up against the insistence, by representative intellectuals of the major traditions, that the doctrinal claims of their own tradition possess universal truth and are comprehensible to, applicable to, and desirable for all human beings (Wainwright, 2004, p. 220). Paul Griffiths has urged that hermeneutical charity should lead us to think that these intellectuals are not confused about the kind of intellectual enterprise they take themselves to be conducting. Accordingly, “the burden of proof is on those who deny that apparent conflicts between the doctrinal statements of competing traditions are real” (Wainwright, 2004, p. 220).

Wainwright considers several proposals for supporting such a denial, including:

### **1. Competing doctrinal claims are incommensurable.**

“The meaning of a religious claim, and hence the standards for evaluating it, are fixed by its role in a way of life and in the vision of reality that shapes it... . [O]ne can’t simultaneously live as a Christian, say, and as a Buddhist... . The doctrinal claims these ways of life incorporate, however, are incommensurable and so can’t conflict” (Wainwright, 2004, p. 221). According to Wainwright, “This view founders on the fact that representative intellectuals of the major traditions implicitly acknowledge the existence of *universal* standards for assessing disputed doctrinal claims” (2004, p. 221). These standards include factual fidelity, logical consistency, explanatory power, as well as a pragmatic

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1. Page numbers in this section refer to this essay. A briefer consideration of the topic, with a focus on “comparative theology,” occurs in *Reason, Revelation, and Devotion*, 2016, pp. 53-58.

requirement: “Comprehensive worldviews must enable those who use them to act successfully and enter into satisfactory relations with ‘the cosmos in its totality’” (Wainwright, 2004, p. 221). So there are, in fact, criteria for measuring the supposedly incommensurable views against each other, criteria which are often appealed to in interreligious disputes.

## **2. What is religiously important is personal authenticity; propositional truth is relatively unimportant.**

According to William Cantwell Smith, religion is not itself true or false, but “becomes more or less true in the case of particular persons, as it informs their lives ... and shapes and nurtures their faith” (Wainwright, 2004, p. 223, quoting Smith 1981, p. 187). In agreement with William Christian, Wainwright argues that this approach does not eliminate conflicts. Consider the recommendations that “the Dharma [the Buddha’s teaching] is the path to attain Nirvana,” and “the Torah teaches us how to respond rightly to God.” These can’t both be accepted, “partly because one can’t consistently live both as a Buddhist and an orthodox Jew, and partly because the competing recommendations are based on other doctrines about ‘how things are’ and things can’t both be the way Buddhists say they are and the way Jews say they are” (Wainwright, 2004, p. 223). Doctrinal conflict can’t be avoided in this way.

## **3. The major religions teach the same thing.**

This just seems clearly false. “Nirvana is ultimate” and “Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is ultimate” do not mean the same thing, nor are they logically equivalent. Nor is it true that the virtuosi of the major traditions have the same experiences or teach the same doctrines. “The theistic mystical experiences of such figures as Ramanuja or Julian of Norwich or John of the Cross are clearly different from the experiences cultivated by Advaitins or Zen Buddhists” (Wainwright, 2004, p. 224).

## **4. Religious Pluralism.**

Wainwright finds the most sophisticated attempt to minimize the differences between religions in religious pluralism, which he considers in the versions advocated by John Hick and Peter Byrne. According to Hick, the religious beliefs and practices that are constitutive of the major traditions are the product of two factors. On the one hand, there is “the Real,” the ultimate, transcendent, reality that stands behind all religious belief and experience. On the other hand, there are the various cultural traditions that serve as filters that determine how the Real is experienced within that tradition. There are two major ways in which the Real is experienced and conceived. The Real may be experienced as *personal* – as the divine “personae,” such as Yahweh, Allah, or Vishnu. Or it may be experienced as *impersonal* – as “impersonae” such as the Tao, Nirvana, or the *nirguna* Brahman. But, one might ask, which of these

pictures the Real in the way that is the truest, the most correct? However, no answer can be given to this: the Real can be described only in formal concepts; our substantial concepts (such as “wise,” “powerful,” “good” – or “personal” and “impersonal”) do not apply to it at all (and neither do the negations of these concepts apply to the Real). However, the divine personae and impersonae “are indeed manifestations of the ultimately Real, [and] an appropriate human response to any one of them will also be an appropriate response to the Real” (Hick 1989, p. 350).

Wainwright has several criticisms of Hick’s scheme. It seems doubtful that Hick can succeed in limiting what is said about the Real to “formal” as opposed to “substantive” properties. As Wainwright points out, the Real is said to be “the cause or ground of religious experience, and ‘causality’ isn’t a purely formal property” (Wainwright, 2004, p. 226). Furthermore, “the thinness of Hick’s concept of the Real raises the question of how he (or anyone) could know that a Reality-centeredness that displays itself in the active practice of *agape/karuna* is a more appropriate response to the transcategorical reality than selfishness or violence or cruelty... . The problem is ... that given the Real’s transcategoricity, there appears to be no basis for asserting that one response to it is more appropriate than another” (Wainwright, 2004, p. 227). In responding to this objection, Hick was finally forced to adopt the view that “the change from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is appropriate because ‘all the great religions teach’ that it is, and we are ‘taking them to be authentic responses to the Real.’” (Wainwright, 2004, p. 228; the embedded quotes are from Hick 1995, pp. 77-78). Hick’s formal concept of the Real turns out to be too thin to support by itself even the most minimal religious conclusions.<sup>1</sup>

1. There is a significant later development in Hick’s thought that is not addressed by Wainwright. This development was suggested in 2005, in the preface to the second edition of Hick (1989), but was clarified and corrected in Hick (2011). The key points in this proposal are as follows:

- 1) The monotheistic God figures are human projections, existing only in the religious imaginations of a particular faith community... .
- 2) These projections are human responses within a particular cultural situation to the continuous impact upon humanity of the universal presence of the Real... .
- 3) The Thou experienced in prayer and revelation is quite likely an intermediate figure between us and the Real ... corresponding to the angels, archangels of the western monotheisms, or devas ... of Indian religions, or the heavenly Buddhas of one interpretation of one strand of Mahayana Buddhism... . This suggestion is an attempt to make sense of what I take to be the actual situation – on the one hand, the transcendent transcategorical Real and, on the other, personal presences known in some forms of religious experience (Hick, 2011, p. 200).
- 4) (Hick has written this article in response to Hasker’s article, 2011).
- 5) Hick’s article (2011) is a response to Hasker’s article, 2011.

Peter Byrne agrees with Hick that all of the major religious traditions make reference to the same transcendent, sacred reality. All of them, furthermore, make effective provisions for the salvation of human beings – for the establishment of a proper relationship between humans and that reality. And on the other hand, none of the traditions provides warrants that are sufficient to justify regarding that tradition as uniquely correct and as the standard against which others must be measured.

An important difference between Byrne and Hick is that Byrne rejects Hick's claim that the Real can be described only in formal concepts. Byrne insists that the transcendent reality must be able to contribute something to the actual content of religious experience, which seems not to be the case for Hick. So while Hick erects an impermeable conceptual barrier between the Real and the ideas and practices that operate in actual religions, for Byrne there is not such a barrier; rather, what constrains us is our inability to show convincingly that one tradition is superior to all the others. But Byrne does not reject in principle the possibility that some demonstration along these lines might be produced.

Wainwright points out, however, that both Byrne and Hick are committed to the insistence that a demonstration of the superiority and correctness of one tradition must be “universally available [i.e., in principle convincing] to all peoples” (Wainwright, 2004, p. 233). The problem here, according to Wainwright, is that “Pluralism ... rests on a loaded concept of reason – an Enlightenment conception which has no place for the notion (common to the traditions) that information, intelligence, and fair-mindedness often aren't enough. The state of one's heart, or appropriate spiritual dispositions, may also be epistemically necessary” (Wainwright, 2004, p. 234). Wainwright suspects that “Byrne's not unadmirable commitment to Enlightenment ideals of reason is merely a reflection of his own 'passional nature'” (Wainwright, 2004, p. 234).

### The Move to Exclusivism

It seems, then, that the ways that have been proposed to eliminate conflict and disagreement between different religious traditions are unsuccessful. In particular, religious pluralism is subject to serious objections. In view of this, Wainwright turns to the main alternative to pluralism, namely exclusivism. It is important to keep in mind that this is *cognitive* exclusivism, which holds that the fundamental doctrines of the favored religion are true, and the doctrines of other religions, insofar as they conflict with them, are false. This is not the same as *salvific* exclusivism, which maintains that only adherents of the one true religion have any hope of reaching salvation. Many, perhaps most, adherents of cognitive exclusivism hold also to *salvific inclusivism*,

which asserts that provision has been made whereby practitioners of other faiths, those whose failure to accept the true faith is not due merely to willful resistance, also have a way to reach salvation. Nevertheless, even cognitive exclusivism is poorly regarded in many sophisticated religious circles.

One challenge to exclusivism is found in certain alleged epistemic principles, principles that have the effect that adherents of an exclusivist perspective are insufficiently rational. There are various ways such principles can be formulated (see the examples taken from Plantinga, 1995, on p. 235), but the general idea can be expressed as follows:

**Parity Principle:** If one holds a belief such that (a) there is at least one contrary belief that seems at least equal in epistemic merit to the belief in question, and (b) the proponents of the contrary belief are equal to oneself in knowledge, skill in reasoning, as well as in sincerity and other relevant personal qualities, then one ought not to hold the belief in question.

The idea here is that it is arbitrary to continue to hold such a belief when the belief has no apparent, epistemically relevant advantage over an alternative. However, there are several drawbacks to accepting the parity principle as a general rule of epistemic propriety. As Wainwright points out, adherence to this principle would mean that one could not affirm any controversial philosophical belief; for example, either side of the controversy as to whether determinism is compatible with moral responsibility. Philosophers, of course, typically do not give up their philosophical beliefs under such circumstances, nor does anyone seriously maintain that they should. With reference to religious exclusivism, it may be pointed out that determining the relative epistemic merits of competing religious systems is a difficult and demanding task; in many cases, one may wonder whether this task has in fact been carried out. But philosophically, the demise of the parity principle is guaranteed by the fact that the principle is self-referentially incoherent. For there are many rational, well-informed, and well-disposed exclusivists who reject the principle, and this fact is sufficient reason, according to the principle itself, why the principle should not be held.

Even apart from the parity principle, the charge of arbitrariness may still seem to have some force. Typically, however, the person who continues to hold a belief under such circumstances will not believe that the competing beliefs are really on an epistemic par. Such a person may think, in the words of Alvin Plantinga, “that somehow the other person *has made a mistake* or *has a blind spot*, or hasn’t been wholly attentive, or hasn’t received some grace [I] have, or is in some way epistemically less fortunate” (Plantinga 1995, pp. 202, 204-5). And such suppositions may very well be true – though, of course, they

may also be true of oneself.

Wainwright holds that, in the end, a religious exclusivist cannot avoid making some judgment of the sort Plantinga indicates. He says,

Reflective exclusivists *needn't* regard their rivals' beliefs and epistemic procedures as absurd or patently irrational. But I think they *must* regard them as expressions of moral or spiritual failure... . [A] reflective exclusivist will wonder why members of her own tradition have gotten things right while adherents of other traditions have gotten them wrong. Since information and intelligence are more or less evenly distributed, the most natural explanation is that her rivals suffer from moral or spiritual blindness, and this charge can't help but seem benighted to outsiders. Should the exclusivist be worried by this? I am not sure (2004, p. 239).

After some additional discussion, Wainwright concludes his essay with the following:

The charge of moral and spiritual blindness may sometimes be in order. Exclusivists who make it, however, should do so in fear and trembling, and with considerable spiritual discomfort (Wainwright, 2004, p. 240).

### A New Question

Up to this point, this essay has been summarizing Wainwright's thinking and conclusions, with occasional editorial interjections. At this point, we introduce a new question, one that is suggested by Wainwright's discussion but is never really addressed by him. In Wainwright's advice to exclusivists, he assumes that the exclusivist's confidence in her own tradition is maintained, though perhaps perturbed somewhat by the phenomena of religious diversity. But sometimes the effects of diversity may go beyond this. Perhaps the believer's confidence in her tradition is deeply undermined, so that she no longer is confident that this tradition gives uniquely good access to the truth about the divine. Or perhaps she has never reached a state of confident belief in the first place. Wainwright notes that this may sometimes occur,<sup>1</sup> but he does not offer any suggestions as to how this situation can be remedied.

In light of our discussions to this point, this situation seems more ominous than it may previously have appeared. Many will have been initially attracted

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1. Wainwright points out that Plantinga, by refuting the parity principles, does not "address the situation of persons who are trying to decide between traditions, or of those whose grip on their religious beliefs has been seriously weakened by their awareness of religious diversity" (2004, p. 237). Wainwright does not, however, have anything to say that does address the situation of such persons.

to the various proposals, such as religious pluralism, that minimize the existence or the importance of disagreements between religious traditions. However, our discussion has shown that these options are less plausible, and less appealing, than they may have seemed. At this point, the seeker may find herself wondering whether she has any access at all to the truth about God and the divine. She is left with a confusing medley of conflicting assertions, with none of them, so far, able to make a compelling case that it is the one that ought to be believed.

It may occur to us at this point to appeal to natural theology, but this appeal also is less than promising. Even taking an optimistic view of the prospects for natural theology, it seems unlikely that natural theology, all by itself, can provide sufficient information about the divine to provide overall guidance for a religious life. And given the contentious nature of arguments in natural theology, it is doubtful that natural theology can generate assurance that is sufficiently strong to constitute a secure basis for such a life. Natural theology, it seems, may best be deployed as support and reinforcement for a belief system that has additional grounds of its own.

In fact, the answer to our question is at this point both simple and obvious: *The truth about the divine is accessible if and only if there has actually been a genuine divine revelation.* Note furthermore that, if we believe that such a revelation actually exists, we are immediately committed to some form of exclusivism, as opposed to pluralism and relativism. If the Vedas are divinely inspired, the Jewish and Christian scriptures are not, at least not in the same sense. If the Koran is divinely inspired, then the New Testament is thoroughly corrupted, since it contains much that contradicts the Koran. Christians, to be sure, affirm the divine inspiration of (what they term) the “Old Testament,” but their reception of that text is very different from the view taken of the Jewish Bible by orthodox Jews. And so on.

We have arrived at the result that knowledge of the divine is accessible only if there exists a genuine divine revelation within some religious community. Some will conclude from this that, in the absence of some evident revelation of this sort, skepticism about the divine is the most reasonable response. (Those who find it evident that such a revelation exists will not be in this position to begin with.) Others, on the other hand, will find that something, or someone, has “put eternity into our hearts,” and will not find it possible to give in to skepticism. In this case, what is called for is a serious, perhaps consuming, intellectual and spiritual quest. Directions for conducting such a quest are provided by the different traditions; they cannot be included in this essay. But at the end of the quest, there may be found the pearl of great price, for which, once it is found, one sells all that one has.

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