



An Appreciation and Extension of William Wainwright's Insights on Interreligious Dialogue

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Abstract



In honor of William Wainwright, this article takes up his interest in interreligious dialogue. It pursues two goals simultaneously: One is to provide a better model for understanding philosophy of religion. Terrence Tilley claims that there is the *standard model* which is mistaken in that it takes arguing for religious beliefs to be equivalent to justifying commitment to a religion. He promotes a *practical model*, which has its ancestry in the writings of Michel de Montaigne and Blaise Pascal. This model begins with the lived practices of religion and justifies its intellectual content as explanation for the rightness of this way of life. Wainwright's work fits into the practical model, but Tilley provides a description and a stronger basis for it. The second goal is to provide much more adequate epistemological resources than those used by the standard model, with contributions from Catholic modernist theologian George Tyrrell, recent philosopher of science Imre Lakatos, and Alasdair MacIntyre, who became interested in evaluating traditions, in science, in moral reasoning, and finally what he came to call large-scale traditions. The problem he needed to overcome is the fact that such traditions carry their own, often different, concepts of reasoning. The possibility of fruitful rational conversation between religions is illustrated here by an account of dialogue between Christianity and Shi'ia Islam, as exemplified in David Burrell's ability to use conversation with Islamic thought to clarify for Christians their own doctrines of the Trinity, the mediation of Christ, and original sin.

Keywords

Burrell, D.B.; interreligious dialogue; Lakatos, I.; MacIntyre, A.C.; Mulla Sadra; Tilley, T.W.; Tyrrell, G.; Wainwright, W.J.

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Introduction

In honor of William Wainwright, this paper will consider one of his major interests, the epistemology that justifies religious beliefs on the basis of the experiences from which they grow, as well as on the moral consequences to which those beliefs lead. Wainwright worked within the paradigm of positions that framed discussions of interreligious dialogue (hereafter, ID) for at least a generation: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, with each of these applied to the categories of truth and salvation. His assumption of this paradigm appears in his last article, “God, Love, and Interreligious Dialogue,” in a lovely way: his endorsement of Catholic theologian Karl Rahner’s position on inclusivism regarding salvation, not only among Christian sub-traditions but among world religions (2020). His concept of the “anonymous Christian,” saved by “the universal saving will of God” was key to the Second Vatican Council’s new openness to other religions (Habib & Ahmad, 2021, p. 1).

Unfortunately, the epistemological resources upon which this paradigm for ID was based, “reliabilism,” is woefully inadequate. Wainwright evidently perceived this, and therefore turned to even older resources—in this article, the work of John Henry Cardinal Newman (1870).

Section 2 of this article has three goals: one is to provide resources to buttress Wainwright’s approach to the justification of Christian doctrine and theology on the basis of Christian practice. In “Religious Experience and Religious Pluralism” he considers the efficacy of justifying Christian belief on the basis of Christian mystical practice, but due to the reliabilist epistemology he employs, he concludes only that engaging in the practice “might not be epistemically *irrational* ... ” (2000, p. 224). So the second goal of this section will be to provide a critique of reliabilism. The third goal will be to provide much more adequate epistemological resources, one of which is Alasdair MacIntyre’s concept of tradition–constituted rationality (1988; 1990).

MacIntyre’s work will also serve as the starting point for Section 3. Amos Yong, in his book on Christianity–Buddhism–science dialogue notes the general recognition today of the historical situatedness and contextually circumscribed nature of religious knowledge, and asks how one could get a “bird’s eye view” from which to make epistemological judgments about other faiths (2012, p. 12). To my knowledge, MacIntyre has presented the best account so far of how to attain such a view, and it takes a lifetime of work to come to understand the relations among even two or three such traditions. David Burrell writes that “comparative work will always involve entering into different traditions in such a way as to see how one can fertilize the other” (2012, p. 58).

So Section 3 presents the outstanding work Burrell has done, in the process

of studying Islamic theologies, to improve Christian understanding of its own doctrines of the Trinity, the mediation of Christ, and original sin. He states that fears about “relativism” give way when traditions are “found to be *relative* to one another in ways that can prove mutually fruitful rather than isolating” (2012, p. 61). In this chapter, he does not mention this, but he told me that he began spending time in Qom after he had been invited to a Mulla Sadra Conference in Iran many years ago (personal communication July 21, 2022).

Epistemologies for the Philosophy of Religious Plurality

In contrast to the deeply engrained tendency of Western thinkers to put intellectual inquiry first and to assume that actual lived practices of the relevant community will follow, Wainwright should be commended for taking practice as his point of departure for addressing the hard question of epistemological justification of Christianity’s intellectual commitments. This section first provides additional support for this reversal of priority, largely from Terrence Tilley. But in Section 2.2, I turn to a critique of the epistemological resources of the current ID paradigm’s reliabilist epistemology, which still mars Wainwright’s work, even though he has sought better resources from the past. Finally, in Section 2.3, I offer several additional resources from philosopher of science Imre Lakatos, Catholic modernist George Tyrrell, and Alasdair MacIntyre, mentioned above, who bring us much closer to an adequate religious epistemology.

The Wisdom of Religious Commitment

Wainwright’s book, *Reason and the Heart*, came out in 1995. Terrence Tilley’s book, *The Wisdom of Religious Commitment*, came out in the same year. It would have been such a gift to

Wainwright if he had had Tilley’s book as a resource rather than turning to the past: to Jonathan Edwards, William James, and Newman.

Tilley points out that mainstream philosophy of religion has allowed skeptics, from David Hume to Kai Nielsen, to set the terms of debate. Religiously committed philosophers have been on the defensive, attempting to provide arguments for the existence of God or to show that religious believers are within their epistemic rights to hold their beliefs (1995, pp. 5–8).

Tilley advocates for a minority tradition, beginning with Michel de Montaigne and Blaise Pascal, which he calls “practical philosophy of religion.” Mainstream philosophy of religion confuses belief in God’s existence with the practice of religion as a whole. For this minority position, religious knowledge comes from living a life shaped by religious practices and

learning the beliefs that these practices carry and transmit. “A practical philosophy of religion recognizes the social, institutional, and practical dimensions of life without neglecting religious belief. But ... [it] focuses on religious believing as practices of *embodied* persons, not on propositions to be debated by minds engaged in academic exercises (1995, p. 9).¹ These practices *generate* beliefs. The parallel here with the illuminationist philosophy of Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra is striking: Philosophy is a way of life; spiritual practice requires the integration of spiritual practice into the pursuit of wisdom (Rizvi 2005, p. 227). Burrell writes that in the Muslim world, religion focuses on practices, which become a path leading to understanding (2010, p. 2).

Tilley expresses the same frustration with which Wainwright begins his “God, Love, and Interreligious Dialogue” (2020). A pattern of argument (well described in Brad Kallenberg’s article in this issue, 2022) that “often degenerates into name-calling, proof-texting, and finger-pointing ... (Tilley 1995, p. 16). And, as does Wainwright, Tilley looks to the past; I find his interpretation of Pascal’s “Wager” (1670) the most moving. Mainline philosophers often see it as a simplistic rational argument: Either God does or does not exist. If you believe in God and there is none, you may have lost a few of the pleasures of life. But if there is a God and you do not believe, you miss out on the infinite gain of eternal life. So far, the argument is not particularly interesting. But it was addressed to sophisticated intellectuals, wearied of religious conflicts in France at the time, many of whom had simply become skeptics.

Pascal addresses an imagined interlocutor who claims that although he is convinced by the wager’s argument, he simply cannot bring himself to believe. Pascal tells him not to seek more rational arguments but to cure himself by doing as others before him have done, by acting as if they believed; taking holy water, having masses said—essentially taking up the way of life of the believer. In the end, the interlocutor will find that he has become “faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful” (Pascal, *Pensées*, §233, in Tilley 1995, p. 23).

Tilley concludes that the skeptic’s problem cannot be intellectual so it must be “passional”—a striking parallel with Wainwright’s language (1995, p. 21). Another striking parallel is that Wainwright’s chapter cited above (2000,

1. The disembodied character of philosophy in the U.S. has not been restricted to philosophy of religion. While I was a Ph.D. student at U.C. Berkeley in the 1970s some of us joked that when we went to professors’ offices it was as if we were nothing but brains supported on something like broomsticks.

pp. 218–25) is a critique of William Alston's *Perceiving God* (1991), and one of the religious epistemologists to which Tilley responds is Alston's use, in that book, of "Christian Mystical Practice" (CMP) as a reliable doxastic practice for *prima facie* justification of the theological beliefs that explain them (1995, pp. 77–89).

Both Wainwright and Tilley criticize Alston's assimilation of CMP to sensory perception. Alston claims that we cannot justify taking any of our belief-forming practices to be reliable without relying on what we learn from engaging in them. And this is not a vicious circularity because such practices are socially established, their outputs are internally consistent, and consistent with the outputs of other doxastic practices. Thus, we are similarly justified in engaging in CMP (see also Alston, 2000).

Wainwright quotes Alston, writing that this *prima facie* justification "has application only when there is a *system* of knowledge or justified belief about the relevant subject matter, against which a particular *prima facie* justified belief can be checked" (Alston 1991, p. 262, my emphasis). Wainwright replies, however, that there are other radically incompatible religious belief systems, such as Buddhism. Therefore, the mystical practices that they incorporate are also seriously incompatible (2000, p. 218). So commitment to Buddhist mystical practice is "fully rational only if one has good [external] reason for thinking that the Buddhist worldview is superior to its rivals" (2000, p. 224, n. 13).

Likewise, discussing Pascal's wager, Tilley asks whether taking up the *practices* of Catholicism does not simply beg the practical question: why this practice in *this* tradition rather than some other? (1995, p. 22). But Pascal saw the problem, for his audience, not as the choice between a far removed and quite different religious tradition, but between true religion, the love of God, the love of that than which none greater can be conceived (cf. Anselm), and the interlocutors' ... vicious practices [that] have given [them] a taste for poisonous pleasures" (Tilley 1995, p. 24).

Again Tilley reinforces Wainwright's position by referring explicitly to Newman's "real assent," and to James's rejection of mere external conformity. At the same time, Tilley's statement that "practices shape persons" (1995, p. 24) seems to allude to several of Edwards's twelve criteria for recognizing "truly gracious affections," such as the seventh sign: "Another thing, wherein gracious affections are distinguished from others, is, that they are attended with a change of nature" (Edwards, [1746] 1959, p. 340). So Tilley uses exactly the same thinkers to whom Wainwright refers in his *Reason and the Heart* (1995).

However, I see serious problems remaining for Wainwright. He recognizes in his critique of Alston that unlike the doxastic practice of sense perception,

which is universally accepted as generally reliable, and more importantly, in which there can be non-circular grounds for, say, settling conflicting accounts between two witnesses, such as a videotape of a car accident (or more likely in our day a cell-phone recording), “precisely this condition is lacking in the religious diversity case” (Wainwright 2000, p. 219, quoting Alston 1991). He goes on to present a clever example (also from Alston): the methodological opposition between psychoanalysis and behaviorism, in which the dispute rests on the question of whether clinical insight and interpretation even count as evidence. Alston claims that it is not irrational for the psychoanalyst to continue to form clinical beliefs in the way he does.

In contrast, I have argued that the psychotherapeutic model of mental illness is, in general, less effective than the medical model in treating mental illnesses (Murphy 1997, ch. 4). Although my study did not specifically concern psychoanalysis versus behaviorism, I have shown that *there is* an external criterion, increased clinical efficacy, that can be applied to the status of their theoretical content; it would therefore be possible to show that practitioners of one or the other were irrational to continue.

So neither sense perception nor psychotherapeutic practices serve as adequate analogies for taking religious experience as a reliable warrant for practitioners’ truth claims. Wainwright, especially given his reliance on Newman’s *extremely* individualistic (and I would claim, *vague*¹) notion of the illative sense has not provided resources for the “bird’s eye view” of religious traditions called for by Yong.

On a positive note, however, Wainwright, in his article in this journal does recognize that, although Newman’s illative reasoning is tainted by subjectivity, his argument satisfies the criteria for inference to the best explanation (2020, p. 10). These include “objections overcome ... adverse theories neutralized, ... difficulties gradually clearing up,” consistency with other things known or believed, and the fact that “when the conclusion is assumed as a hypothesis, it throws light upon a multitude of collateral facts, allowing for them and uniting them together in one whole” (Wainwright 2020, p. 10; quoting Newman 1870, pp. 254–256).

1. In Newman’s favor, though, he was writing before the discovery of non-Euclidian geometry and the various formalizations of symbolic logic, so he could not have been aware of the later judgment that deductive certainty only applies within the symbolic system itself, and is lost as soon as a decision is made that the system in question can be “interpreted” by existential relations, such as the application of Robachevskian geometry by Einstein to large-scale spatial relations.

Peculiarities in Contemporary Religious Epistemology

I present here my critique of the epistemology common among recent philosophers of religion. It is woefully out of date and may even be said to exhibit what is called a category mistake.

Although analysis of the concept of knowledge as justified, true belief goes back as far as Plato, it has come in the twentieth century to be called the *standard* analysis of knowledge. It is still widely held in the discipline of religious epistemology, despite the fact that in 1963 Edward Gettier published a paper, merely three pages long, in which he presented two fatal counter-examples of cases in which an individual held a justified, true belief that we would *not* count as knowledge. One was the following:

Smith and Jones have applied for the same job. Smith is justified in believing that (a) Jones will get the job, and that (b) Jones has ten coins in his pocket. On the basis of (a) and (b) Smith infers, and thus is justified in believing, that (c) the person who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. At [sic.] it turns out, Smith himself will get the job and he also happens to have ten coins in his pocket. So, although Smith is justified in believing the true proposition (c), Smith does not know (c). (As related in Moser 1992, p. 157)

Moser concludes that it is “epistemologically important ... to have a defensible solution to the Gettier problem, however demanding such a solution is” (1992, p. 159).

A much deeper mistake than the individualism plaguing much of current religious epistemology is substituting the question of a *person’s justification in believing* for justification of the content of a belief. A belief is one type of intentional state (in the technical philosophical sense), or propositional attitude. For example, a person might *believe that* the weather will be cooler the next day—let *P* stand for this “propositional content” of the belief. So one might *hope* that *P*; *doubt* that *P*, and so forth. But why should philosophers care about the justification of any particular person’s belief? The important question is whether *P* itself is justified. Consider this instance: I wrote the example about hoping for cooler weather one night, and I did have that hope. The next day it was cooler, but I had no justification for believing it would be, so that was no case of knowledge. Another slightly different case: It is false that San Francisco, CA is south of Los Angeles, but it may well be *true* that Samira believes that San Francisco is south of Los Angeles. So the truth of a *propositional attitude* does not track with the truth of that attitude’s *propositional content*. Both of these examples show that confusing a person’s believing or being justified in believing, with justification of the propositional

content of a belief is what Richard Rorty and others would call a “category mistake.”

Before I checked references to be sure my memory of these issues was accurate,¹ I had noted that the philosophers of religion who made the move from justification of the content of a belief to justification of the person who holds it are often referred to as Reformed epistemologists, with the capital ‘R’ referring to the Reformed Christian sub-tradition most closely associated with John Calvin (1509–64); Calvinism makes central the doctrine of the *justification* of *individuals* by God’s grace. It occurred to me to wonder whether this had anything to do with the fact that one of the most outspoken proponents of this move is the prolific philosopher of religion, Alvin Plantinga, who in fact belongs to the Reformed Church.

Much to my amazement, I read an entry in *A Companion to Epistemology* (1992) on the epistemology of religious belief—written by Plantinga himself—who notes, first, that the theory defining knowledge as justified, true belief “has enjoyed the status of *orthodoxy*” (1992, p. 437, my emphasis). Second, he writes:

The core of the notion of justification (as the etymology of the term indicates) is this: one is justified in doing something ... if in so doing one is *innocent* of wrongdoing ... To be justified in *believing* something, then, is to be ... doing no wrong in believing in this way. (1992, p. 437, emphasis original)

I am greatly oversimplifying in classifying the mainstream of religious epistemology in the U.S. as “reliabilism” and attributing the weaknesses of Wainwright’s work on ID to remnants of the position that he was attempting to evade in his turn to Edwards, James, and Newman, but I believe that this is the point at which to move on to what I see as more helpful resources.

Contextualizing Religious Believing in the Entirety of Practice

In my earlier days, I confess that I was more of a typical rationalist philosophical theologian, and while I will relate some of that work to Wainwright’s (and Alston’s), I hope to end with an account that will live up to Tilley’s call for a practical approach to religious epistemology.

I take as my starting point the all-too-brief account Wainwright provides regarding inference to the best explanation (see the last paragraph of my sec.

1. A number of religious epistemologists believe that memory is a reliable belief-forming process. Unfortunately, I can testify that after fifty years it is not!

2.1 above). It incorporates the hypothetical reasoning that both Carl Hempel and Karl Popper assumed during the neopositivist era in philosophy of science (c. 1940–1970); that is, one proposes an explanatory hypothesis based on a set of data, and it is either confirmed or falsified by Newman’s “multitude of collateral facts”; that is, by testing predictions that can be made from the hypothesis.

1. Historicist Philosopher of Science Imre Lakatos

The philosopher of science I have used to describe possible *theological* research programs is Imre Lakatos (1970). He described a scientific research program as consisting of a hardcore—what I took to be the non-negotiable doctrines at the heart of a *theological* tradition (Murphy 1990). The core is surrounded by a collection of “auxiliary hypotheses.” These are both explained by and supportive of the hardcore, and mutually consistent. An example would be what I present below: Burrell’s proposed modification of elements of Christian teaching—the doctrine of the Trinity, the mediation of Christ, and the doctrine of original sin, as he has modified them so as to show their congruity with Islamic theology. These variable theological proposals need to fit with the data, which include the teachings of authoritative texts, the communally tested experiences of adherents of the tradition, and, in the case of the three Abrahamic traditions, historical facts.

Lakatos notes that the relevance of the data that support a particular scientific research program will be a consequence of the overall program. So another ingredient in a scientific research program is a set of “theories of instrumentation” that explain why certain types of data are relevant to support the program, and also explain how the instruments used to collect such data work. An instance in early modern astronomy was explaining how a telescope works and why the images it provides should be trusted.

In the theological case, the parallels to Lakatos’s theories of instrumentation will depend on its doctrine of where the authority of the church lies and its ideal for the institutional structure of the church. For Catholics, this includes authoritative Church pronouncements; while for Southern Baptists it is precisely *not* to have, for example, the Southern Baptist Convention determining either practices or theology of individual congregations.

I have argued that theories of revelation and of textual interpretation, and theories of discernment for testing the results of religious experiences are analogous to Lakatos’s theories of instrumentation (1990, ch. 5). I examined practices of communal discernment: from New Testament times; in Ignatius of Loyola’s (1491–1556) rules for the discernment of spirits; discernment by the whole community among the radical reformers of the sixteenth century;

Jonathan Edwards's (1703–1758) “distinguishing marks of a work of the Holy Spirit”; the Society of Friends, beginning with George Fox (1624–91) and continuing today; and discernment in contemporary charismatic prayer groups.¹ In all of these cases the criteria generally include congruity with the Scriptures; intersubjective agreement (either with one's more experienced pastor, or the entire community if it is small enough); often, felt impulses to speak² and, very importantly, production of fruits: Jesus said “by their fruits you shall know them” (Matt. 7:20). Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, listed the fruits of the Spirit as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5: 22–23).

A unique feature of Lakatos's proposal for justifying scientific research programs is his criterion of empirical progress: its proponents use its theories to make predictions regarding as-yet-unknown facts; this counts as theoretical progress. If one or more of these facts *is confirmed*, the program is then *empirically* progressive. However, Lakatos accepted a proposal from Elie Zahar that a previously known fact that had played no role in the formulation of the research program ought to be counted as a novel fact when its relevance is recognized (Lakatos [with Elie Zahar] 1978, ch. 4; see also my 1989, pp. 385–88).

This requirement lines up rather closely with both Tilley's and Wainwright's criticism of Alston's assimilation of Christian mystical practices to sensory perception. Whereas sensory perceptions can be externally confirmed, Alston seems not to provide for external confirmation of the deliverances of Christian mystical experiences. To a great extent, I claim, the practice of discernment can retrospectively rule in or out particular religious experiences, and it does have a prospective aspect in the formation, over time, of greater fruits, both in the individual and within the community. However, another author, working shortly after Newman, provided for genuinely new and independent confirmation.

2. Catholic Modernist George Tyrrell

Catholic modernist George Tyrrell was indeed a practical philosopher of religion in Tilley's sense. He wrote a number of essays between 1899 and 1907, collected in his book *Through Scylla and Charybdis* (1907). He covered the nature of Catholicism as a whole, as well as the nature of revelation, of

1. Were it not for my participation in such a group and experiencing its efficacy I would not have become interested in studying theology, particularly *because* I noted the circularity problem.

2. Compare this with the divine impulses Tyrrell describes below in sec. 2.3.2.

dogma and theology, prophecy and history, papal authority, and even an evaluation (a negative one) of Newman's theory of the development of doctrine.

In his essay "Reflections on Catholicism" (written for this book, 1907, pp. 20–84) he took great care to distinguish Catholicism as a historical phenomenon, "a living concrete reality," from the theory of Catholicism such as that of the scholastic apologists. The theological scheme of the church is not exhaustive of her reality; in fact, no theory could ever capture the entire phenomenon. It was confusion of the religion itself with its already dead representation in scholastic *theology* that made the defense of Catholicism appear to be such a difficult task.

In "Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi" (previously, 1899) he presented his methodology. His work was predicated on the prediction that theology could be done in a new way: theology could be construed as a set of theories to explain the experiences of the life of the church (as well as the Scriptures, the first and normative expressions of that experience). Catholic theories (doctrines) would thereby be shown to be *empirically* supported, and Catholicism, by these means, would indeed be confirmed as the true faith. His new method rejected the "conclusions theology" by which the scholastics attempted to *deduce* conclusions from Scripture; he also now rejected Newman's notion of development, saying that if we rightly distinguish theology from both revelation and dogma this gives us the freedom to adjust theology to our current forms of language and thought without distorting or conflicting with the "deposit of faith" (1907, pp. 85–105). So the Scylla in the title of the book was the "already dead representation of Catholicism in scholastic theology" and the Charybdis was "liberals" such as Newman, claiming that the earliest teachings of the Church could grow organically into something as different as an oak tree from an acorn.

Data for theology included, of course, the Scriptures, history, and agreed-upon pronouncements of the early church. However, this was just at the time when historical critical methods were first applied to both Scripture and history. As many others in his day, Tyrrell was shaken by these developments, but he did come to realize that there had to be a more basic layer of data supporting the judgments of biblical critics and historians.

This may be one of the reasons that he emphasized the data that came from participation in the practices of the church. In his early days (1902) he wrote that, in addition to the data from Scripture and history, the community (not individuals) worked out a code of conduct by testing various reactions to new situations and observing the consequences. Over the years these experiments produced a growing body of knowledge of what best conforms them to the

Higher Reality.

In a later essay, “The Rights and Limits of Theology” (1905) he made room in his account for continuing divine action in shaping a pattern of feeling, thought, love, will, and action that constitutes the Catholic form of life. He wrote: “What alone is directly given from above ... is the spiritual craving or impulse with its sympathetic and antipathetic responses to the suggestions, practical or explanatory, that are presented to it, whether casually or by the industry of the reflective religious intelligence” (1907, p. 207). “Here it is that man seems to be guided and taught ... by a divine spirit in direct communication with its own; and this in the interests of conscience and duty and worship, not of those in speculative curiosity” (1907, p. 209).

However, this guidance is only approximative, approving one alternative, not as ideal and finally perfect, but as a move in the right direction toward an ideal way of life (1907, p. 210). Note that this leaves room for different ways of life with their associated theologies, but presumes that God’s gradual teaching should, over time, bring them closer together. When this expectation is combined with Tyrrell’s assertion that human reaction to God’s touch is necessarily characterized “by the ideas, forms, and images with which the mind is stocked in each particular case” (1907, pp. 208–09), we have a fairly robust explanation for the plurality of religions, and grounds for hope in their coming into closer agreement. This is no justification for refraining from controversy; Tyrrell wrote that to put an end to controversy is not only impossible but undesirable: “Controversy in some sense is the indispensable condition of our progress in the apprehension of truth.” But these controversies differ in kind, ranging from highest to lowest (1907, pp. 1–2)—that is, from the constructive to the mean-spirited.

This is the point at which to turn to MacIntyre’s account of the role of competing traditions in moving toward Yong’s bird’s eye view of religious traditions.

3. Contemporary Philosophical Ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre

The most sophisticated account of human reasoning, to date, is found in the writings of MacIntyre.¹ In the course of arguing for his position in ethics, he developed a concept of tradition–constituted rationality that has much broader applications. I have done much to promote MacIntyre as an epistemologist but it has often been without much success. I believe the reason is that the detailed

1. This section is a revision, included with permission, from my article “Illuminating Modern Western Skepticism,” in *The Journal of Philosophical Theological Research* (Murphy, 2019).

historical work he has done in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988) and his Gifford lectures, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990) is not merely illustrative, but rather constitutive, of his account of rationality, and the historical work cannot be reproduced in a short paper such as this.

There is also the issue that MacIntyre addresses in the introduction to *Three Rival Versions*: the audience, and what a particular audience is or is not prepared to hear. My reading of his later work was as one versed in philosophy of science, and I believe that MacIntyre is best heard as the last word in the series from Karl Popper to Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, and Imre Lakatos. The germination of his theory of rationality was already present in an article titled “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science” (1977). So I present here a brief sketch of MacIntyre’s account of rationality to illustrate a major approach to the comparative justification of lived traditions that would, if pursued, provide a complex and difficult program for comparing claims to truth of different religious traditions.

MacIntyre argues that all rationality is tradition–constituted. A tradition is understood as an ongoing, socially embodied argument¹ about how best to interpret and apply an authoritative text. Large–scale traditions such as the Aristotelian or Enlightenment tradition incorporate their own accounts of truth, justification, knowledge. Their social embodiment involves institutions and especially social practices. He defines virtues as acquired characteristics needed for attaining the goods internal to these practices. It is in light of a tradition’s account of ultimate reality that the purpose of human life can be discerned.

Traditions from time to time fall into epistemological crises, due to internal incoherence, new experiences that cannot be accounted for, or challenges from rival traditions. One of his major contributions is to refute the relativist’s supposition that every tradition will appear successful to its own adherents.² Traditions can sometimes, therefore, be judged relative to one another on the basis of whether they can or cannot, *on their own terms*, overcome their crises. In some happy cases, one tradition can be seen to be rationally superior to its rival in that the one can explain *why* its rival fell into a crisis, and had to fail at just the point it did. This ability provides the best grounds we can have for saying that the surviving tradition’s account of the basic nature of reality is

1. Recall Tyrrell’s comment on controversy, quoted at the end of the section above.

2. I devoted most of my text on the philosophy of the Christian religion (2018) to the epistemological crises Christianity has faced since the beginning of the modern period, some of which are still not adequately resolved today. All of these crises are well-known to Christian scholars.

more adequate. A tradition that survives such dialectical questioning by a variety of rival claimants is in position to claim that its most basic account of reality is true.

MacIntyre's account incorporates a variety of moves that are key to avoiding skepticism regarding the possibility of judging the truth of competing religious traditions.¹ First, it is in line with Tilley's practical tradition in philosophy of religion, which de-emphasizes academic arguments about doctrinal content of religions and focuses on their embodied practices and moral ideals. MacIntyre has offered a revised Thomist account of truth as the adequacy of the *socially embodied* mind to reality. Second, as also emphasized in his definition of truth, MacIntyre insists on the sociality of knowledge, thus incorporating the insight that understanding is linguistic, and that language is *essentially* social. Third, he emphasizes that knowledge is acquired through social practices, through activity. Finally, on the role of texts: Rorty suggests that all knowing is like interpreting texts (1991). I believe that MacIntyre would say instead, borrowing a term from George Lindbeck, that all knowing is "intratextual." That is, not all of reality is a text or text-like, but we interpret all of reality in light of our formative texts (Lindbeck 1984).

MacIntyre describes philosophy as a craft to be learned by apprentices from experts. One can envision the acquisition of knowledge as groups engaging in a variety of carefully structured practices (e.g., giving theological lectures; discussing what they are doing and how better to accomplish the goals of the practice (e.g., at faculty meetings); meanwhile referring sometimes to a shared text (e.g., the Qur'an) and arguing about how the text applies to their lives and how their practices embody that text. So hermeneutics, conversation, and pragmatics are all an integral part of knowledge.²

Some critics of MacIntyre's work see it as "agonistic"; that is, as involving nothing but rivalry and competition. However, his most impressive exemplar of tradition-constituted rationality is Thomas Aquinas, who learned a great deal from his *sympathetic* readings of medieval Muslim philosophers, as well as the Jewish philosopher Maimonides. His overcoming of the conflicting

1. MacIntyre is now best known as a philosophical ethicist. I told him that I was interested in applying his proposal for testing the truth of competing large-scale traditions to religions, and he asked why I would *want* to do such a thing (personal communication). However, given what he has written in his (2009) about *Catholic* philosophy, he might be more open to the suggestion at this point.

2. In my earlier article in this journal (2019) I suggested that Mulla Sadra's writings (along with the Qur'an) might be construed as authoritative texts from which his followers have developed a MacIntyrean-style tradition.

Augustinian and Aristotelian traditions was not to defeat the Aristotelian tradition, but rather to show that most of Aristotle's philosophy could be incorporated into the Christian tradition. Philosophical theologian Paul Seungoh Chung has argued persuasively that Thomas's "five ways" are not to be read simply as arguments for God's existence, but as showing how close one could come using (only) Aristotelian-style reasoning to the knowing of God's existence. However, at that point theology needs to take over, via revelation, to describe the character of that God (Chung, 2016).

MacIntyre claims that a scholar who can learn another tradition, "who inhabits both alternative conceptual schemes, who knows and is able to utter the idiom of each from within, who has become, so to speak, a native speaker of two first languages ..." is very rare (1990, p. 114). The following section describes just such a scholar.

David Burrell: A Life Given to the Study of Islam

Just as I was planning this article, I received an email from an old friend, David Burrell, for the first time in about five years. He had seen one of my articles in the *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research* and simply wrote to tell me that he also loved Qom (personal communication, 2022/07/16). On the phone, David and I agreed that among all of the countries each of us had visited (nearly non-overlapping lists) Iranians are the most hospitable we had encountered (personal conversation, 2022/07/21). Another gift was an attached chapter he had written, "A Philosophical–Theologian's Journey," for a book titled *Christian Lives Given to the Study of Islam* (2012, pp. 54–62). This section will consist almost entirely of a summary of that chapter.

David is indeed a scholar who has entered into both the Jewish tradition and the Islamic tradition(s) in such a way as to become a native speaker of not two, but three, first languages. The equivocation regarding the singular or plural of "Islamic tradition" comes from Burrell's experience, after attending a conference at the opening of the Mulla Sadra Institute in Tehran in 1999. Having spent his time up to that point among Sunni Muslims, he had only heard the name of Mulla Sadra, but many others at the event had never heard of him at all (Burrell, 2010a, p. 45).

At that point, he wanted a copy of Mulla Sadra's magnum opus, *al-Asfār al-arba'ah fī l-hikmat al-muta'aliyah* (Mulla Sadra, 1981). He had tried a large philosophical bookstore in Amman and then an extensive Arabic book fair in Cairo, but no one in either city had heard of Mulla Sadra, despite the fact that Hossein Ziai had identified Mulla Sadra as one of the most revered of all

Islamic philosophers. Burrell wrote that he had encountered “the iron curtain between Sunni and Shi’ite intellectual worlds” (2010a, p. 44). When he finally found the volumes, he was inspired to translate the passage on *existence*.¹

Burrell’s goal in his chapter (2012) is to show how interfaith exchange can offer a vehicle for developing doctrine. He first takes up the issue of trinitarianism in Christianity. He notes that it took Christians themselves six centuries to figure out how to reconcile their “threeness” with the unity of God as emphasized by both the Hebraic tradition and *tawhid* in Islam. So it is unsurprising that Christians themselves easily misunderstand the doctrine (2012, p. 59).

Given the Islamic recognition that the Qur’an must be co-eternal with God, Christians can see the preferability of the Gospel of John’s speaking of Jesus as the incarnation of God’s *word* in preference to the three other Gospels’ use of *son* of God. “The fact remains that our faith is indeed ‘Trinitarian’ ... yet the process of dialogue will have brought us to a better articulation of our respective understandings of *trinity* and of *unity* in God” (2012, p. 59).

His next example is a corollary to the first. Trinitarian thought uses the terms “persons” and “substance.” God is three persons (not in the modern individualist sense²) in the one “substantial” God. Burrell says that while we Christians focus on the mediating role of Jesus in bringing about our relationship with God, we often put this role as mediating *between* God and the Word, suggesting a “space” between God and humankind. Yet this understanding of mediation has (probably unknown to most Christians) been repudiated by early councils. So the fact that Muhammed is not considered to be a mediator, and especially the fact that Muslims, in the gift of the Qur’an have an “immediate” relationship with the Word of God assists Christians in holding to an *appropriate* understanding of Christ’s mediation (2012, p. 59). Because of Jesus’ divine–human constitution, this leaves no possibility for Jesus to be *between* God and humans or another being *beside* God (2012, p. 60).

Another point of contention between Christians and both Jews and Muslims is the Augustinian concept of original sin. Burrell notes that there are

1. Such a translation is not listed among his translations, but in his “Mulla Sadra’s Ontology Revisited” (2010b) there are long passages on this theme inserted into the narrative of his life, with no attribution to any other translator.

2. I earned my Th.D. at the Graduate Theological Union, which at that time was a consortium of nine theological seminaries. The first to close was the Unitarian school. The number of students kept falling, and I think it turned out to be the case that *one Person* in the student body is not enough. However, I believe that all *Three* of the Original Catholic seminaries have survived.

denominational differences here regarding how badly Adam's fall has damaged the whole of human nature, and that the means by which that damage is supposed to be transmitted "remains obscure."

Regarding Christian denominational differences, I simply must quote Burrell here: "The meanings Christians attach to this teaching range from the characteristic Catholic view, captured in [G. K.] Chesterton's insistence that 'original sin is the only empirically verified Christian doctrine' ('Murphy's Law' in the moral order¹), to the most stark contention that its effects render our intellectual and voluntary faculties utterly dysfunctional" (2012, p. 60). Furthermore, he notes, Christians do not even agree on the means by which Jesus the Word brings about a solution to this human predicament.

While recognizing that the concept of original sin is a sticking point for Muslims, he asks whether Christians as well as Muslims can all realize that it requires assistance from God to draw near to him. Does not Islamic thought without the Qur'an leave all people to wander aimlessly, and generally to follow their own desires, often so tragically ending in violence?

So while Christianity focuses on the death and resurrection of Jesus, Muslims locate the redemptive act *par excellence* in the unmerited and serendipitous 'coming down' of the Qur'an from God through the Prophet... . So this dynamic reinforces the fundamental analogy between Jesus and the Qur'an: as Christians believe Jesus to be the Word of God made human, Muslims believe the Qur'an to be the word of God made book. (2012, p. 61)

Since human language must always be inadequate, comparative struggles can accentuate items in one's own tradition that need to be clarified. This is consistent with his account of interreligious dialogue as "moving forward 'one friendship at a time'" (2012, p. 58).

But first, a bit more about Christian teaching. In line with the practical, explanatory understanding of doctrine, Christian theologian James McClendon rejects outright Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin as a failure. Yet there are facts about individual sin that still need explaining: (1) the ubiquity of sin—"we all have sinned." (2) The fact that we all seem to be somehow entrapped in sin before we reach the point of committing our own sins. And (3) that we seem not to be able not to sin (McClendon, 1994, ch. 3, sec. 2.).

1. "Murphy's Law" states that whatever *can* go wrong *will*. It has numerous corollaries such as "Whenever you drop a piece of toast it will always land butter-side down." It is said to have been formulated by a Captain Edward Murphy in 1949. So its addition to Chesterton's remark (d. 1936) had to have been by Burrell himself. But he cannot have had me in mind at the time!

McClendon notes that theologians in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had come to recognize the existence and power of social or structural evils. More recently, biblical scholars recovered the New Testament teachings regarding the “principalities and powers,” which had been lost afterward by associating these with demons. In the 1950s and 1960s G.B. Caird (1956), Hendrick Berkhof (1953), and others examined such terms, found especially in the Letter to the Colossians, in which Paul prays that the congregation “may be made strong with all the strength that comes from his [God’s] glorious power ...” (Col. 1:11). For Christ is the image of God, who created “things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers ...” (Col. 1:15). These powerful practices were created by God for humankind’s benefit, for we cannot live without social structures, but have fallen and become rebellious (McClendon, 2002, p. 179). Jesus met the two most powerful, the corrupted Jewish authorities and the Roman Empire on the cross, and triumphed over them in the resurrection.

With this external account of the ubiquity of sin, we no longer need an explanation for the transmission of sin to all generations, either in terms of a Neoplatonic change in the Form of humanity or a (discredited) biological theory of inheritance.

Time To Sum Up

I remarked above that Tyrrell, in his essay “The Rights and Limits of Theology” (sec 2.3.2) had inadvertently produced a lovely theory regarding exchanges between religions. He wrote of God’s subtle “sympathetic” or “antipathetic” responses to human impulses arising from “the industry of reflective intelligence” for those who are sensitive to them, shifting them toward better approximations of truth. When this is combined with Tyrrell’s recognition that human responses to this divine touch are characterized by the “ideas, forms, and images with which the mind is stocked in each particular case” we have both an explanation for the plurality of religions and grounds for hope in their coming into closer agreement. In what I’ve written of Burrell’s and especially McClendon’s comments on the doctrine of original sin, above, I think we see an example of Christians coming to closer agreement with Muslims.

McClendon knew that Augustine’s mind was already, in general, stocked with the idea and images of a tragic prehistoric fall, and more immediately with his current conflict with Pelagius’s more optimistic picture of the human predicament. McClendon’s mind was stocked with the recovery of the biblical teachings on superhuman principalities and powers. So he was happy to reject the whole idea on the basis that its source was cultural, not the authoritative texts of Scripture.

This particular episode, with which I finish this article, appears to me to be such a kinder, gentler, (and more truth-seeking) way of relating to another religion than the old paradigm's insistence on its epistemic *rights* to maintain whatever beliefs have been handed down from authorities. I hope Wainwright would be pleased with this sort of "passional reasoning" with regard to our sisters and brothers of other faith traditions.



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