

## Internal Realism and the Problem of Religious Diversity

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**Abstract** This article applies Hilary Putnam's theory of internal realism to the issue of religious plurality. The result of this application – 'internalist pluralism' – constitutes a paradigm shift within the Philosophy of Religion. Moreover, internalist pluralism succeeds in avoiding the major difficulties faced by John Hick's famous theory of religious pluralism, which views God, or 'the Real,' as the noumenon lying behind diverse religious phenomena. In side-stepping the difficulties besetting Hick's revolutionary Kantian approach, without succumbing to William Alston's critique of conceptual-scheme dependence, internalist pluralism provides a solution to significant theoretical problems, while doing so in a manner that is respectful of cultural diversity and religious sensitivities.

**Keywords** Philosophy of religion · Religious pluralism · Internal realism · Internalist pluralism · Hickean pluralism · William P. Alston · Hilary Putnam · Conceptual schemes · Cultural diversity

As societies become increasingly multicultural, there progressively arises a need for an appropriate theory that is capable of making sense of the various difficulties presented by religious diversity. To be precise, what seems to be required at this historical juncture is a theory of religious pluralism that is suitably sensitive to the challenge posed by cultural diversity, while remaining respectful of religious differences.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, a theory that reduces the beliefs of other cultures to inferior versions of one's own – never mind to some perversion of it – fails to meet this seemingly growing need. In what follows, I adumbrate a theory that may well meet it. The theory, which I call 'internalist pluralism,' aims to provide, given the tremendous diversity of belief systems, a philosophical account of the

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<sup>1</sup>The need for a political philosophy that is sensitive to cultural diversity and religious differences is, of course, a key motivation behind Rawls, J. (1996). *Political liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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various and apparently divergent claims made by religious believers, while simultaneously avoiding the difficulties incurred by previous approaches to this problem. In particular, internalist pluralism is offered as an alternative theory of religious pluralism to that famously developed by John Hick,<sup>2</sup> and it aspires to avoid the considerable weaknesses in Hick's otherwise attractive theory.

### John Hick's 'Copernican Revolution' in the Philosophy of Religion

In order to appreciate the need for a new theory of religious pluralism, let me begin by considering Hick's attempt at making sense of the diversity of religious truth-claims.

Hick's profound originality consisted in applying certain Kantian metaphysical insights to the Philosophy of Religion. In a nutshell, Hick proposed what he considered to be 'a Copernican Revolution' within the discipline. In the Ptolemaic system of astronomy the earth was thought to be at the center of the universe, with all the other planets revolving around it. Thus, applied to religion, Christianity was regarded as the center of the universe of faiths. On the later Copernican view, by contrast, the sun occupies the central place, and all other planets, including the earth, revolve around the sun. Thus, by analogy, Christianity is in orbit around God, or 'the Real,' along with the rest of the world faiths. The message is clear: Christianity must no longer be considered essentially unique and essentially privileged. It is part of a family of world religions which are all equally orbiting around God, or 'the Real.'

This Copernican revolution in the Philosophy of Religion is premised upon a Kantian metaphysic that sharply distinguishes between the phenomenal and noumenal realms. Kant believed that humans could, in principle, know only the phenomenal realm; the noumenal things-in-themselves being intrinsically inaccessible. Applied to religion, the Copernican/Kantian view takes the phenomena to be the mooted objects purportedly identified by the adherents of the various world religions, and the noumenon to be God in Godself, or 'the Real.' So all humans can ever know is the differing phenomena recognized within the world's varied religious traditions. It is impossible to step outside of these traditions and identify the ultimate objects or their source. Given this veil of ignorance, as it were, Hick invites us to apply a principle of charity, and to accept that all of the world's religions are equally worthy of belief. Each offers an authentic way of achieving the religious goal.

Hick, in purportedly advancing from a Ptolemaic to a Copernican worldview, thus presents his theory as a paradigm shift.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, he criticizes the Ptolemaic (Christianity/earth-centered) paradigm because it must posit an ever-increasing number of *ad hoc* hypotheses in order to account for anomalies. Unfortunately, Hick's Copernican/Kantian paradigm has also suffered a similar theoretical deterioration. For it could itself be described in Lakatos' terms as a degenerating problem shift<sup>4</sup> – one that has been forced to propose ever more seemingly *ad hoc* hypotheses in order to account for troublesome data.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Hick, J. (1974). *God has many names*. Philadelphia: Westminster; Hick, J. (1985). *Problems of religious pluralism*. New York: St. Martin's; and Hick, J. (1989). *An interpretation of religion: Human responses to the transcendent*. London: Macmillan.

<sup>3</sup> See Kuhn, T. S. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

<sup>4</sup> See Lakatos, I. (1970). Falsification and the methodology of scientific research programs. In I. Lakatos & A. Musgrave (Eds.), *Criticism and the growth of knowledge* (pp. 91–195). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Specifically, Hick has made two major *ad hoc* adjustments to his original God-centered, Copernican/Kantian paradigm:

- (1) in order to accommodate non-theistic forms of Buddhism, it became necessary for ‘God’ to be characterized as ‘the Real’; and
- (2) in order to account for a greater range of religious perspectives, ‘the Real’ has had to be so interpreted that it may be construed as capable of generating both personal and impersonal religious phenomena.

Both of these adjustments to Hick’s original hypothesis have been attended by a host of difficulties, which in turn demand further adjustments to the thesis in order to account for them. Later, I shall outline the major difficulties confronting Hiccan pluralism.

Perhaps, then, given that there are major difficulties with Hick’s approach, the time has come to move onto a new paradigm? After all, the Copernican paradigm in astronomy is itself now outdated. If we ask an astronomer of today where the center of the universe is, she might say that it is the point mid-way between the most distant particles of matter. She might say that it is wherever the ‘Big Bang’ originated. She might even say that the universe has no center. What she would certainly not say is that the center of the universe is the small sun located in the middle of our minor solar system.<sup>5</sup>

By way of a ‘post-Copernican’ paradigm shift, what I propose is a new research program within the Philosophy of Religion – one that is based upon Hilary Putnam’s theory of internal realism.<sup>6</sup> I suggest that this alternative theoretical approach, with certain modifications, offers the prospect of the best theory of religious pluralism (‘the best’ in the sense of being the most coherent and economical). But before I explain how Putnam’s internal realism is pertinent to the issue of religious plurality,<sup>7</sup> first allow me to offer a brief characterization of his theory.

### Putnam’s Internal Realism

Putnam, in the middle period of his work, famously contrasts ‘internal realism’ with ‘metaphysical realism.’ The form of metaphysical realism Putnam singles out for attention holds three core claims: (1) that the world consists of a fixed totality of mind-independent objects; (2) that there is exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is;

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it should give us cause for reflection that it took 250 years to apply Kant’s metaphysics to the Philosophy of Religion. And it may well be that the field lags a long way behind developments in scientific thinking. Hence, suggesting another paradigm shift at this stage might be described as working at break-neck speed! On the other hand, it may well be that a paradigm-shift in the Philosophy of Religion is long overdue, given that the Copernican/Kantian revolution within the discipline occurred so late. And we might not be that surprised at the lateness of this revolution if we share Ernst Käsemann’s view of Theology, from where many philosophers of religion are drawn, as an academic nature reserve.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, a number of the core features of Putnam’s internal realism were anticipated by the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. See Harrison, V. S. (2000). *The apologetic value of human holiness: von Balthasar’s Christocentric philosophical anthropology*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Michael Dummett has argued that adopting anti-realism in one domain does not commit one to its global adoption. See Dummett, M. (1968–1969). The reality of the past. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (pp. 239–258). Hence, for parallel reasons, it could be argued that adopting internal realism in the religious domain does not commit one to global internal realism. In other words, localized internal realism seems consistent with alternative metaphysical commitments in other domains. In my view, due to the peculiar nature of religious language and religious ‘facts’, the religious domain particularly invites an internal realist analysis.

and (3) that truth involves some sort of correspondence. Internal realism rejects all three doctrines.<sup>8</sup>

In rejecting metaphysical realism, the internal realist aims to break away from the dichotomy between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ notions of truth and reason as they have been typically construed within modern Western analytic philosophy. Putnam’s aim is to provide an alternative account of objectivity, truth, and associated notions, while denying that there is a correspondence between statements, on the one hand, and some mind-independent reality, on the other.<sup>9</sup>

Why does Putnam refer to this view as ‘internal realism’? Because it holds that the question “What objects does the world consist of?” is only intelligible *within* a conceptual scheme.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, not only is it the case that the objects which the world is thought to contain differ according to which scheme is employed,<sup>11</sup> but also what is true of those objects equally depends upon the particular conceptual scheme. Hence, ‘truth’ does not consist in correspondence to some pre-given objects, for the objects that are deemed to exist are, in some sense, conceptual-scheme dependent. Rather, ‘truth’ is to be understood as ‘idealized rational acceptability’<sup>12</sup> – that is, “some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences *as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system.*”<sup>13</sup>

Note that truth is not simply rational acceptability – that is, that what is true is not reducible to what it is rationally acceptable to believe at any given time. Putnam’s argument for rejecting any such identification is that truth, while being a property of certain statements, is supposed to be one that cannot be lost; whereas justification may be forfeited (for example, the acquisition of further information might render it no longer rational to accept a claim that one was formerly rational in accepting). Therefore, truth and justification cannot be identical.<sup>14</sup> So, a commitment to the characterization of truth as a property which cannot be

<sup>8</sup> See Putnam, H. (1992). *Reason, truth and history* (p. 49). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> The internal realist perspective was advanced by Putnam as early as 1976. In H. Putnam (1976–1977), *Realism and reason. American Philosophical Association Proceedings* (50, pp. 483–498), he defends the view that all situations have a variety of correct descriptions, and that even descriptions that, taken as a whole, convey the same information may differ in what they take to be ‘objects.’ Commenting later on this view, Putnam writes: “If there isn’t one single privileged sense of the word ‘object’ and one privileged totality of ‘intrinsic properties’, but there is only an inherently extendible notion of ‘object’ and various properties that may be seen as ‘intrinsic’ in different inquiries, then the very notion of a totality of all objects and of the one description that captures the intrinsic properties of those objects should be seen to be nonsense from the start.” Putnam, H. (1994). *The question of realism*. In J. Conant (Ed.), *Words and life* (pp. 304f). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

<sup>10</sup> See Putnam, *Reason, truth and history*, op. cit., p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> “In *The Many Faces of Realism* I described in detail a case in which the same situation, in a perfectly commonsensical sense of ‘the same situation’, can be described as involving entirely different numbers and kinds of objects (colored ‘atoms’ alone, *versus* colored atoms plus ‘aggregates’ of atoms).” Putnam, H. (1992). *Renewing philosophy* (p. 120). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

<sup>12</sup> For a defense of a modified version of the idealization theory of truth, see Wright, C. (2000). Truth as sort of epistemic: Putnam’s peregrinations. *The Journal of Philosophy*, XCVII, 6, 335–364. But see Putnam, H. (2001). When ‘evidence transcendence’ is not malign: A reply to Crispin Wright. *The Journal of Philosophy*, XCVIII, 11, 594–600.

<sup>13</sup> Putnam, *Reason, truth and history*, op. cit., pp. 49f.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.* In so arguing, Putnam is distancing his internal realism from Dummett’s anti-realism. Dummett reduces truth to what one is warranted in asserting. But if ‘truth’ is equated with ‘warranted assertibility’, then because there are some claims that one is neither warranted in asserting nor warranted in denying, they are neither true nor false. This constitutes the basis of semantic anti-realism. See, for example, Dummett, “The reality of the past”, op. cit.

lost by any statement that possesses it is enough by itself to avoid the conflation of truth and rational acceptability. Thus, while rejecting traditional versions of realism, Putnam's theory nevertheless claims to reserve the right to be viewed as a variety of realism, because it retains the distinction between truth and justification. And the hallmark of realism is often held to be precisely a distinction between truth and justification, or, conversely, the hallmark of anti-realism is often held to be the reduction of truth to justification.<sup>15</sup>

But while Putnam is a realist in distinguishing between truth and justification, he nevertheless rejects the view that truth is somehow independent of all conceptual schemes or that it is tied to one, and only one, conceptual scheme – the supposedly correct one. How, then, is the distinction between truth and rational acceptability to be maintained within any conceptual scheme? As we have noted, the distinction is to be maintained by regarding truth as an *idealization* of rational acceptability. In other words, truth is to be viewed as inhabiting epistemically ideal conditions, of which, unfortunately, there are none.<sup>16</sup> Even though this might suggest that truth is unattainable, the idealization theory of truth incorporates two key features that enable us to make truth-claims. The first is that truth is independent of justification here and now, but not, in principle, independent of all justification. Rather, to claim that a statement is true is to claim that it could, in principle if not in fact, be justified.<sup>17</sup> The second is that the truth-claims within a particular conceptual scheme that are most likely to be true will be those that are stable or 'convergent'.<sup>18</sup>

### Internalist Pluralism

Let us now return to the problem posed by religious diversity. Hick saw lying before him three serious alternatives which, he presumed, exhausted all possibilities: either (a) we dismiss all religious experience as mere illusion; or (b) we unjustifiably assert that the religious experiences of adherents to one faith are veridical and those of adherents to other religious traditions are not; or (c) if we are to take the other-worldly reality of the divine as seriously as believers do, then we must postulate a noumenon behind the numinous.

Hick rejects (a) because, in his view, neither religious thought nor experience is, "as such, a matter of delusion and projection."<sup>19</sup> Rather, he claims, they mediate "a real contact with a higher reality."<sup>20</sup> He rejects (b) because our religious views seem most to depend

<sup>15</sup> See note 34, below.

<sup>16</sup> Putnam: "What this shows, in my opinion, is not that the externalist view is right after all, but that truth is an *idealization* of rational acceptability. We speak as if there were such things as epistemically ideal conditions, and we call a statement 'true' if it would be justified under such conditions. 'Epistemically ideal conditions,' of course, are like 'frictionless planes': we cannot really attain epistemically ideal conditions, or even be absolutely certain that we have come sufficiently close to them. But frictionless planes cannot really be attained either, and yet talk of frictionless planes has 'cash value' because we can approximate them to a very high degree of approximation." Putnam, *Reason, truth and history*, op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>17</sup> By way of clarification, Putnam has, more recently, insisted that in *Reason, truth and history* he "proposed to identify 'being true' not with 'being verified', as Dummett does, but with 'being verified to a sufficient degree to warrant acceptance under sufficiently good epistemic conditions.'" And as he adds in a footnote: "For Dummett, a sentence is, in general, either (conclusively) verified or it is not (apart from vagueness). For me, verification was (and is) a matter of degree." Putnam, H. (1994). *Sense, nonsense, and the senses: An inquiry into the powers of the human mind. The Dewey Lectures 1994, Lecture I, The antinomy of realism. The Journal of Philosophy*, 91, 461.

<sup>18</sup> See Putnam, *Reason, truth and history*, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> Hick, *Problems of religious pluralism*, op. cit., pp. 102f.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

upon the particular background into which we were born. It therefore seems safe to assume that if we had been born into a different society, then we would hold different religious convictions and would thus be far more inclined to accept the experiences of adherents to the religious tradition of that society as veridical. Yet it seems unjustifiable simply to assume that we were born into the right background.<sup>21</sup> Hick thus opts for (c). However, there is another alternative – internalist pluralism – one that Hick, evidently, had not considered.

An internal realist holds not only that the objects which are deemed to exist are dependent upon the conceptual scheme employed, but also that the very notion of ‘existence’ is equally conceptual-scheme dependent.<sup>22</sup> For consider Putnam’s original example of a world comprising three colored ‘atoms.’ In the conceptual scheme of ‘the Carnapian Logician,’ they constitute all the objects that exist. However, in the conceptual scheme of ‘the Polish Logician’ – one that counts aggregates along with atoms – seven objects exist: three individual atoms, three pairs of atoms and one trio. Hence, not only is it the case that what counts as an ‘object’ is conceptual-scheme dependent, but it is equally the case that what counts as ‘existing’ is dependent upon the conceptual scheme employed. And thus *it makes no sense* to talk of anything existing outside of all conceptual schemes. In a word, reality is conceptual-scheme dependent.

This implies that there is no way of intelligibly discussing what exists in a manner that is conceptual-scheme neutral. What happens when we apply this conclusion to religion? A thoroughgoing internal realist should, to be consistent, recognize that the existence of purported religious realities can only be meaningfully discussed within a particular conceptual scheme or, what we might call, a ‘faith-stance.’<sup>23</sup> For it would make no sense to talk of ‘the Real’ as existing outside of any faith-stance.<sup>24</sup> But given different faith-stances – in other words, given different conceptual schemes – this suggests the possibility of different realities and different truths.<sup>25</sup>

In short, just as the truths within the conceptual scheme of ‘the Carnapian Logician’ differ substantively from those within the conceptual scheme of ‘the Polish Logician,’ the truths within one religious tradition may differ substantively from those within another. But as with the case of the two logicians, this does not entail that either set of religious claims thereby necessarily fail to be genuine truths. Moreover, if two different sets of religious claims both comprise truths, they would remain truths without any form of correspondence to some reality outside of all religious or secular belief systems. Indeed, from the standpoint of internal realism, there is no reality ‘existing’ outside of our conceptual schemes. A

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Hick, J. (1997). The epistemological challenge of religious pluralism. *Faith and Philosophy*, 14(3), 281.

<sup>22</sup> Eli Hirsch refers to this as ‘quantifier variation.’

<sup>23</sup> See Harrison, *The apologetic value of human holiness*, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> A further implication of this analysis, which I cannot elaborate here, is that the ‘common-core thesis’ of religious experience, which many philosophers of religion subscribe to, is erroneous. For a critical discussion of the ‘common-core thesis’, see Moore, P. (1978). Mystical experience, mystical doctrine, mystical technique. In S. T. Katz (Ed.), *Mysticism and philosophical analysis* (pp. 101–131). New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>25</sup> This follows from the claim that what it means for a religious object to exist is stipulated within a religious conceptual scheme. An important example is the way that the existence of God has been variously understood within the monotheistic religions. Debates within the religious traditions themselves about the meaning of ‘existence’ when applied to God strongly suggest that one cannot legitimately impose a concept of ‘existence’ from outside the relevant conceptual scheme. Nor ought one to assume that one understands what believers are claiming without an in-depth study of their respective theologies.

religious belief system is thus, in a sense, a self-contained world. And there is a plurality of such belief systems. Hence, this constitutes a theory of religious pluralism – what we might appropriately call ‘internalist pluralism’ – that is neither ‘Ptolemaic’ nor ‘Copernican.’ Rather, it seems more ‘Einsteinian.’

Internalist pluralism might thus allow one to say, for example, that within the conceptual scheme of Shaivite Hinduism, Shiva is a real, objectively existing God; while within the conceptual scheme of Roman Catholicism, the Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit objectively exists.<sup>26</sup> But what one could not do is intelligibly discuss the qualities of, for example, Shiva from within a conceptual scheme, such as a Christian one,<sup>27</sup> in which Shiva occupies no place. It follows that there can be no legitimate dispute between those within different belief systems about the objectivity of their respective claims unless they genuinely enter into each other’s belief systems.<sup>28</sup> For example, consider the case of a Christian asserting that Jesus is the Son of God, and a Muslim replying: “No, he isn’t!” They may not, in fact, be disagreeing, but merely talking past each other (just as ‘the Polish Logician’ is not actually contradicting ‘the Carnapian Logician’ in denying that in a world of three atoms there are only three objects).<sup>29</sup> In this way, internal realism can be employed to generate a radical theory of religious pluralism – internalist pluralism.

Internalist pluralism, moreover, unlike certain other theories of religious pluralism, does not amount simply to philosophical relativism about religious beliefs. Philosophical relativists typically deny that objective truth is attainable. The internalist pluralist, on the other hand, can talk about objective truth – even though it remains objective truth only within some conceptual scheme. For when the Carnapian looks at a world comprising only three atoms and states that that world only contains three objects, the statement is objectively true. There are not four objects within that world if one employs the Carnapian conceptual scheme. But equally, when the Polish Logician looks at a world comprising three atoms, and states that that world contains seven objects (for it also contains three pairs and a trio, which the Polish Logician counts as objects), then the statement is no less objectively true. In other words, given three atoms, it is *objectively* true that there are only three objects within a ‘Carnapian world’ and it is equally *objectively* true that there are

<sup>26</sup> A fuller treatment would clarify the relationship between religious conceptual schemes and the world religions as lived and practiced. Suffice it to say that a subscriber to internalist pluralism is not committed to regarding ‘religious conceptual schemes’ and ‘religions’ as synonymous.

<sup>27</sup> Note: I do not say ‘the’ Christian conceptual scheme, for it cannot simply be presumed that all Christians, merely because they all refer to themselves by the same name, share the same conceptual scheme. The same can be said of all major religions.

<sup>28</sup> What constitutes genuinely entering into a belief system? One is not compelled to become an advocate of ‘the Polish Logician’s’ conceptual scheme in order to understand his claims. Hence, internalist pluralism is not committed to the claim that one must become an adherent of a particular religious belief system before one can understand it. One might achieve a sympathetic understanding of a belief system by, for example, studying its intellectual components, familiarizing oneself with relevant ethnological research, talking to people who subscribe to it, and reading accounts of their experiences, etc. Autobiographies are especially useful for inducting an ‘outsider’ into the thought-worlds of their authors. It would be difficult to read, for example, *Sun Chief: The Autobiography of a Hopi Indian*, without gaining some insight into what it feels like to adhere to the Hopi belief system. See Simmons, L. W. (Ed.) (1942). *Sun Chief: The autobiography of a Hopi Indian*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

<sup>29</sup> However, it is also possible for there to be a genuine disagreement. See note 41, below. I am merely pointing out that not all seeming disagreements may actually be substantive.



seven objects within a ‘Polish world.’<sup>30</sup> Thus, when one turns to consider religious plurality, any particular faith-stance could come with its own set of objective truths that are non-commensurate with those of other belief systems.<sup>31</sup>

Equally, internalist pluralism is not simply a version of religious subjectivism, where ‘truths’ are demoted to whatever the believer takes them to be. For internalist pluralism is no more a form of mere subjectivism than is internal realism. Given a world comprising three atoms and their aggregates, ‘the Polish Logician’ is objectively wrong if he thinks that there are 10 objects, just as ‘the Carnapian’ is objectively wrong if, given a world comprising three atoms, she thinks that there are only two. While the number of objects in the world is conceptual-scheme dependent, that number is not a matter of subjective taste. One can easily get the number wrong. Furthermore, getting the number wrong is not simply a case of disagreeing with those who share one’s conceptual scheme. What counts as an object is conceptual-scheme dependent. But once a conceptual scheme has determined what is to count as an object, then if there are any objects, the objects are there to be counted.<sup>32</sup>

It should be clear by now that internalist pluralism, like internal realism, is a metaphysical theory concerned with the nature of truth-claims within different conceptual schemes. It does not, however, comprise an assessment of the truth-value of those truth-claims. Internalist pluralism, then, is certainly not committed to the claim that the various truth-claims made within different religious conceptual schemes are all true. Indeed, it is logically possible, according to internalist pluralism, that all the truth-claims within every religious conceptual scheme are false; just as it is logically possible that only one religious conceptual scheme contains truth-claims that actually are true.<sup>33</sup> Given this, internalist pluralism is not committed to the view that all religious conceptual schemes are equally successful (where success is measured in terms of what proportion of a conceptual scheme’s

<sup>30</sup> C.f. Paul Boghossian, who, notwithstanding his strong inclination towards a form of metaphysical realism, nevertheless writes: “our choice of one conceptual scheme rather than another...probably reflects various contingent facts about our capacities and limitations, so that a thinker with different capacities and limitations, a Martian for example, might find it natural to employ a different conceptual scheme. This does nothing to show that our conceptual scheme is incapable of expressing objective truths. Realism is not committed to there being only one vocabulary in which objective truths might be expressed; all it’s committed to is the weaker claim that, once a vocabulary is specified, it will then be an objective matter whether or not assertions couched in that vocabulary are true of false.” Boghossian, P. (December 13, 1996). What the Sokal Hoax ought to teach us: The pernicious consequences and internal contradictions of ‘Postmodernist’ relativism. *Times Literary Supplement*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> Moreover, once a conceptual scheme is established, it is likely to have a formative effect upon the experience of those who subscribe to it. Thus, those who subscribe to a conceptual scheme in which the Virgin Mary is taken to be an important figure are more likely to interpret an experience, if it is veridical, as ‘an experience of the Virgin Mary’ than are those for whom Kali is more important. Subscription to a particular religious conceptual scheme, then, will incline a person to experience the ‘objects’ recognized within that scheme, if those objects are there to be perceived within it – just as ‘the Polish Logician’ will be more sensitive to perceiving aggregates. This is not to claim, however, that one’s conceptual scheme fully determines the objects that one will experience. It is interesting to note that Hick defends a not-too-dissimilar characterization of the relationship between our beliefs and our experience in Hick, *An interpretation of religion*, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> For as Putnam makes clear in the Preface to *Reason, truth and history*: “I shall advance a view in which the mind does not simply ‘copy’ a world which admits of description by One True Theory. But my view is not a view in which the mind *makes up* the world, either (or makes it up subject to constraints imposed by ‘methodological canons’ and mind-independent ‘sense-data’).” Putnam, *Reason, truth and history*, op. cit., p. xi.

<sup>33</sup> Although it is a logical possibility, it seems most unlikely that a long-lived religious conceptual scheme (such as the conceptual schemes of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) would contain only false claims. Within a conceptual scheme the interaction of belief and experience would seem to stack the odds against that scheme being *entirely* constituted by false beliefs.



significant truth-claims turn out to be true). Furthermore, because it does not presume that all religious conceptual schemes will necessarily be equally successful, internalist pluralism is consistent with a person coming to judge that the religious conceptual scheme she had hitherto employed was inadequate. But on the other hand, it is also logically possible, according to internalist pluralism, that all truth-claims within every major religious conceptual scheme are true, even though the claims made by adherents to different religious traditions might sound radically different.<sup>34</sup>

### Side-stepping the Major Problems in Hick's Theory

In order to indicate some of the advantages in adopting the perspective of internalist pluralism, allow me to indicate briefly how it avoids the seven major problems that currently beset the Hickean theory of religious pluralism, and which, notwithstanding the latter's sensitivity to cultural diversity, invite a paradigm shift away from it. In what follows, I refer to Hick's theory of religious pluralism as 'transcendental pluralism' in order to distinguish it from internalist pluralism.

One problem with Hickean transcendental pluralism is that, in separating religious phenomena from their supposedly noumenal source, Hick is compelled to describe religions as other than their adherents take them to be.<sup>35</sup> In particular, he insists that the 'gods' which religious believers worship are not the real thing. While this does not place one religion above any other, it nevertheless appears to imply that all believers are to some extent mistaken in their beliefs.

Internalist pluralism allows religious beliefs to be taken much more seriously. It considers them in their own terms, and does not necessarily demand a re-description of anything that believers would typically say about their religious belief system. Internalist pluralism may thus leave the claims of religious believers exactly as it finds them. For example, a subscriber to internalist pluralism need have no difficulty in accepting both that, within a Christian conceptual scheme, 'Jesus is the Son of God' is a true claim, and that, within a Muslim conceptual scheme, it is false – if, that is, in both conceptual schemes there is a God to be counted. Unlike the transcendental pluralist, an adherent of internalist pluralism is not, for example, compelled to propose a revisionist account of the divinity of Christ.

A second problem with transcendental pluralism is that, in applying the Kantian phenomena/noumena distinction to religion, Hick appears to have made it impossible to talk meaningfully of revelation. Claims about the divine communicating knowledge about

<sup>34</sup> This might seem indistinguishable from the view defended by Joseph Runzo. See, Runzo, J. (1986). *Reason, relativism and God*. New York: St. Martin's. However, Runzo's goal is to explain how it is that religious believers are entitled to absolute certainty about their religious beliefs, even though they recognize that all of those beliefs are conceptual-scheme dependent. But a realist holds that one can have a justification for feeling certain about the truth of a proposition without the proposition in question being true. In other words, even though Runzo holds that religious beliefs are conceptual-scheme dependent, his position, unlike the view I am here advocating, is not realist. And whereas internal realism is not a form of 'metaphysical realism,' it remains a form of realism.

<sup>35</sup> This is also the most common criticism of D. Z. Phillips' revisionary account of the Christian belief system. Thus, given the argument that follows, internalist pluralism would seem to offer a more persuasive account of religious belief systems than does Phillips' account. For an example of Phillips' approach see Phillips, D. Z. (1986). *Belief, change and forms of life*. London: Macmillan.

itself to humans abound in the world's religious traditions. Hick cannot take such claims seriously as, according to his theory, the religious noumenon is in principle unknowable.<sup>36</sup>

Internalist pluralism simply side-steps this difficulty, for it drops any notion of the religious noumenon. Indeed, internalist pluralism rejects any conception of revelation that is wholly transcendent to the religious conceptual scheme. Claims about purportedly divine revelation must thus be assessed internally to the conceptual scheme in which they are lodged. This is consonant with the claim commonly made by theologians that what religious believers actually mean by claims such as 'God spoke' can only be ascertained within the context of the appropriate tradition. It is a common view that anyone who assumed that they could legitimately interpret the claim 'God spoke' in the same way that they would interpret the claim 'the president spoke' would be assuming far too much. Precisely what it means for God to speak is regarded by an adherent of internalist pluralism as conceptual-scheme dependent, and this clearly fits with such widespread theological claims.<sup>37</sup>

A third problem is that Hick seems forced to appear cavalier with regard to genuine differences between religious traditions.<sup>38</sup> In his view, the differences between religions are merely superficial, for each religion offers a valuable representation of, and way of experiencing, 'the Real.' Thus, Hick does not regard differences in the claims made by adherents of different religions as of much significance. This belittles the importance that many believers invest in their religious truth-claims.

Clearly, internalist pluralism avoids this difficulty, for, as with the way in which it deals with the first problem with transcendental pluralism, in accepting bivalence with regard to statements within a conceptual scheme but not with respect to statements across conceptual schemes, it acknowledges that some statements that may be true within one faith-stance may well be false within another. And in considering religious beliefs in the terms of their believers, internalist pluralism thus has no difficulty whatsoever with accommodating the fact that believers consider there to be genuine differences between religious traditions. Hick, in effect, takes religious claims in one tradition ultimately to mean the same thing as religious claims in another tradition. Internalist pluralism, on the contrary, holds that claims made within one religious tradition may mean something very different to similar sounding claims made within another tradition, just as 'the Polish Logician's' claim that there are seven objects means something very different to a similar sounding claim in the mouth of 'the Carnapian Logician.' And different religious traditions may disagree regarding what beings exist, just as 'the Carnapian Logician' and 'the Polish Logician' disagree regarding what objects exist. Hence, internalist pluralism takes religious differences far more seriously than does transcendental pluralism.

A fourth problem with transcendental pluralism is that, in claiming that the majority of religious truth-claims are mythological (or 'practically true'), Hick presents an account of

<sup>36</sup> Keith Ward's rejection of Hickean pluralism revolves around just this criticism. See Ward, K. (1994). *Religion and revelation* (pp. 310–313). Oxford: Clarendon.

<sup>37</sup> The abundance of literature within the world's religious traditions concerning the divers mechanisms of divine-human communication would thus seem to add weight to the view that the notion of revelation is itself conceptual-scheme dependent.

<sup>38</sup> This criticism is developed by Kenneth Surin in his critique of Hickean pluralism. See Surin, K. (1990). A politics of speech: Religious pluralism in the age of the Macdonald's hamburger. In G. D'Costa (Ed.), *Christian uniqueness reconsidered: The myth of a pluralistic theology of religions* (pp. 192–212). New York: Orbis Books.

religious truth that appears far too weak. Unless religions can make propositional truth-claims, they seem deprived of the ability to convey genuine information.<sup>39</sup>

Again, internalist pluralism simply side-steps this problem. For according to an adherent of internalist pluralism, religious claims may be objectively true (or not) within the particular religious framework or faith-stance in which they are proposed. Indeed, within any religious conceptual scheme, some claims may well be unconditionally true.

A fifth problem with transcendental pluralism is that it fails to provide a convincing account of religions such as Buddhism. Religions that do not recognize an ultimate divine figure will always appear anomalous on Hick's theory.

Internalist pluralism can account quite naturally for all religious phenomena. Buddhism presents no special problem, nor do impersonal concepts of deity (such as nirguna Brahman). For unlike Hickean transcendental pluralism, internalist pluralism does not require the religious beliefs of, say, a Buddhist to refer to phenomena that are ostensibly generated by the same noumenon that supposedly generates the phenomena recognized within other world religions.

A sixth problem concerns Hick's insistence that all religions, ultimately, encourage people to move towards the same goal, which, he claims, comprises a shift from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness. Hence, he argues that core religious concepts such as 'salvation,' 'nirvana' and 'moksha' are all roughly equivalent. Yet this seems highly implausible,<sup>40</sup> not least because each of these concepts surely derives its meaning from the intellectual system in which it is embedded. Moreover, for a religious practitioner to fully understand the meaning of 'nirvana,' say, then he or she would have to accrue the relevant experience – a process that might take many years. It thus seems indefensible simply to assume that those who lack that particular experience have an adequate understanding of the concept 'nirvana.' Consequently, it seems indefensible simply to assume that 'nirvana' and 'salvation' are co-extensive.

Internalist pluralism involves no such implausible claims. It acknowledges that the meaning of the core concepts of a religion is only accessible within that religious belief system. Nor does a subscriber to internalist pluralism have to claim that all religions share the same goal. For an adherent of internalist pluralism will claim that the 'object' which constitutes any religious goal will, in part,<sup>41</sup> be dependent upon the faith-stance of those seeking to attain that goal, and that different faith-stances identify different 'objects.' Thus, there is no need to ignore or misdescribe the diverse data offered by the various world religions.

A seventh problem with transcendental pluralism is that Hick seems driven to offer a highly implausible account of morally motivated atheists. To cut a long story short, he ends up characterizing them as, in effect, anonymous theists who are best viewed as responding to 'the Real' (which, as we have noted, is how he refers to the mooted noumenal reality lying behind religious experience). Yet surely this is susceptible to the same criticism that

<sup>39</sup> Peter Byrne criticizes Hick's theory on these grounds. See Byrne, P. (1982). John Hick's philosophy of world religions. *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 35, 296.

<sup>40</sup> Harold Netland offers such a criticism of Hick in Netland, H. (1991). *Dissonant voices: Religious pluralism and the quest for truth*. Leicester: Apollos. Netland also advances the first four criticisms noted above.

<sup>41</sup> I say 'in part' here because there is a sense in which objects are conceptual-scheme dependent and a sense in which they are, what we might inadequately call, 'world-dependent.' That a world comprising three atoms only contains three objects depends upon one's employing the Carnapian's conceptual scheme as opposed to the Polish Logician's. But there is also a sense in which the fact that there are only three objects does not. For it equally depends on there not being four or more atoms.

Hick himself has leveled against Karl Rahner's theory of the 'anonymous Christian,'<sup>42</sup> namely that it is both patronizing to the atheist and lacking in epistemic justification.<sup>43</sup>

Interestingly, the existence of morally motivated atheists seems to provide further grounds for subscribing to an internal realist theory of pluralism in preference to Hick's Kantian variety. For there is nothing preventing internalist pluralism from taking the beliefs of all morally motivated individuals equally seriously, whether their belief systems are religious or secular. And this is because, in contradistinction to metaphysical realism, internal realism does not presume that some noumenon, never mind that the *same* noumenon, must ultimately lie behind all moral and religious phenomena.

### Defending Internalist Pluralism

Despite such appealing features of internalist pluralism, ultimately its acceptability would seem to depend upon the plausibility of internal realism. Perhaps the most vigorous and influential critic of internal realism is William Alston. If Alston has succeeded in his critique of internal realism, then advocating internalist pluralism would seem pointless. So, in this final section I shall defend internalist pluralism by responding to, what I take to be, Alston's principal objection to internal realism.

Alston's main charge would appear to be that internal realism is internally incoherent because, he claims, its account of conceptual schemes generates a vicious, infinite regress. Alston concludes that in order to be intelligible, a conceptual scheme will require a meta-conceptual scheme which will in turn require a meta-meta-conceptual scheme, and so on *ad infinitum*.<sup>44</sup> He argues that this vicious regress is a consequence of internal realism's insistence that all objects are conceptual-scheme dependent. For once the conceptual-scheme dependence of objects is accepted, the objection goes, one is committed to the meta-conceptual-scheme dependence of conceptual schemes because the latter are no less objects.<sup>45</sup>

But, in response, while it is true that, according to internal realism, one cannot conceive of objects existing outside of all conceptual schemes, and while it might well appear to follow that one cannot conceive of conceptual schemes existing outside of a meta-conceptual scheme that allows one to view conceptual schemes as objects, a person can, nevertheless, conceive of

<sup>42</sup> For Rahner's notion of the 'anonymous Christian,' see Rahner, K. (1969). Anonymous Christians. In K. Rahner (Ed.), *Theological investigations* (Vol 6, pp. 390–398). Baltimore, Maryland: Helicon.

<sup>43</sup> Hick criticizes Rahner's theory for being both patronizing to adherents of non-Christian faiths and epistemically unjustifiable. Hick, J. (2000, January). *Is Christianity the only true religion?* (Paper presented as part of the Horizon Lecture series delivered at Birkbeck College, University of London).

<sup>44</sup> See Alston, W. P. (2002). *A sensible metaphysical realism* (pp. 32f). Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press.

<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, according to Alston, internal realism is committed to two claims that together give rise to a *petitio principii*. First, all objects are dependent upon some conceptual scheme. Second, conceptual schemes are dependent upon human minds. But these two claims entail, in Alston's view, both that conceptual schemes are dependent upon human minds, and that human minds are objects conceived within conceptual schemes and hence are dependent upon them, which seems circular. Ibid., p. 33. But the internal realist can easily respond that the 'dependence' is not of the same sort, and hence the objection rests upon an equivocation. Conceptual schemes are dependent upon human minds in the sense that human minds *create* conceptual schemes. But the internal realist does not hold that conceptual schemes *create* minds. Rather, conceptual schemes determine what 'the human mind' means.

objects as existing, given her conceptual scheme, without possessing any conception of a conceptual scheme as itself an object. Meta-conceptual schemes are tools of higher level interpretation; they do not identify the objects within an everyday world. And whereas, according to internal realism, one needs a conceptual scheme if one is to identify what exists within a world, that world can be adequately comprehended without a meta-conceptual scheme identifying as an object the conceptual scheme that identifies the objects within the everyday world. Putting the point another way, one certainly needs a language for statements within that language to make sense. And one might well require a meta-language if one is to talk about language without generating self-referential paradoxes. But one does not need a meta-language in order for everyday statements within a language to be comprehensible. Similarly, one is not driven to a dependence upon some meta-conceptual scheme for objects to be identified by a conceptual scheme. Put yet another way, if statements can make sense within a language, as they clearly can, even if talking about a language without generating problems of self-referentiality requires a meta-language, then conceptual schemes can successfully identify objects within those schemes even if a meta-conceptual scheme is required in order to identify a conceptual scheme as an object.

In a word, then, the conceptual-scheme dependence of objects no more generates an infinite regress than does the language-dependence of sentences. And if, contrary to fact, the language-dependence of sentences generated an infinite regress such that statements in a language could not make sense without the language making sense within a meta-language, and so on *ad infinitum*, then no statement would make sense. But then, any assumption that an infinite regress is entailed by the language dependence of statements would consist of a statement that only made sense given a language that only made sense given a meta-language, and so on, which would itself entail that any such statement was meaningless, given the obvious fact that statements clearly *are* language dependent. In other words, no such critique can be stated without its entailing that the critique is meaningless. And if this constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of the denial that statements are language dependent, then, given the parallels between language dependence and conceptual-scheme dependence, Alston's critique of internal realism must surely be unsound.

A more interesting variation on Alston's objection would be to argue that an infinite regress of conceptual schemes is generated by the need to posit a meta-conceptual scheme in order to explain how individuals can switch between conceptual schemes. The objector might hold that, for example, in order to explain how someone could move from a Christian conceptual scheme to a Muslim one, and back again, the internal realist would need to posit a meta-conceptual scheme that could be employed to 'translate' the Christian conceptual scheme into the Muslim one, and *vice versa*. However, in response, it would seem that if one had been able to immerse oneself fully both in a Christian and in a Muslim way of life, then one could easily move from a Christian conceptual scheme to a Muslim conceptual scheme and back again, without the need for a meta-conceptual scheme in order to do so. For just as one can easily move from 'It's raining' to 'Il pleut,' and back again, without the need for either a linguistic or a meta-linguistic theory, then, analogously, one does not require a meta-conceptual scheme in order to switch from one conceptual scheme to another.

However, if one does want to understand how Christian and Muslim conceptual schemes fit together into a wider theoretical picture, then one does require a meta-conceptual scheme, such as internalist pluralism, in order to do so. But then, what about an alternative meta-conceptual scheme? If one fully understood both that alternative – Hickean transcendental pluralism, say – and internalist pluralism, one could move from one meta-conceptual scheme to another without the need for an even higher level theory. Hence, because

one can operate within any such theoretical system without a higher theoretical system being necessary, no infinite regress is generated.

One advantage of positing the theory of internalist pluralism as a meta-conceptual scheme is that it enables two conceptual schemes to be taken equally seriously. A danger of those within one conceptual scheme thinking about another conceptual scheme is that they may well think about it solely in terms of their own conceptual scheme, which, in effect, is to reduce the other conceptual scheme to a poorly understood subset of their own worldview. A multicultural world surely requires avoiding the kinds of misunderstandings that such an attitude can give rise to. Hence, if Christians and Muslims, for example, are to begin to understand each other adequately, internalist pluralism provides a useful meta-conceptual scheme for so doing.

But it might then be objected that adherents of internalist pluralism run the danger of failing fully to understand alternative meta-conceptual schemes. So, isn't a meta-meta-conceptual scheme required? It seems to me that adherents of different meta-conceptual schemes very often fail to understand each other adequately. Realists and anti-realists, for example, often seem to talk past each other, and it may well be *advantageous* to seek a meta-meta-conceptual scheme in order to avoid misunderstandings at the level of meta-conceptual schemes. But in order to understand how two conceptual schemes relate, it is not *necessary* to posit a meta-meta-conceptual scheme. One only requires a meta-conceptual scheme. Hence, no vicious, infinite regress is generated.

In short, to understand how the things in a world relate together, one requires a conceptual scheme; and to understand how conceptual schemes relate together, one requires a meta-conceptual scheme. To understand how meta-conceptual schemes relate together, one would require a meta-meta-conceptual scheme. But a conceptual scheme does not *require* a meta-conceptual scheme for it to work. Only if, in order to understand how things relate in a world, one required a conceptual scheme, which itself required a meta-conceptual scheme, which likewise required a meta-meta-conceptual scheme, and so on *ad infinitum*, would an infinite regress be generated. So, in order to understand another conceptual scheme fully, it would, admittedly, be advantageous to go to a higher theoretical level. But one does not require a higher theoretical level in order to understand the objects within one's own conceptual scheme. Now, one might gain a higher understanding of one's own conceptual scheme – especially of its limitations – by going to a higher level. But that is not required for one's scheme to be workable. And only if the theory of internalist pluralism advocated here made a conceptual scheme unworkable without going to a higher level would the theory be susceptible to Alston's critique.

## Conclusion

I have argued that internalist pluralism takes all religious beliefs much more seriously than do other approaches to the problems posed by religious plurality. And it does so by discarding any notion of the religious noumenon. It requires nothing that is transcendent to whichever religious conceptual scheme is in question.<sup>46</sup> It is in a position to acknowledge the genuine differences between religious traditions because it is able to accept that some statements might be true within one faith-stance even while being false within another.

<sup>46</sup> Note: internalist pluralism does not rule out the possibility of a being that is transcendent to our experience. It only rules out a being that is transcendent to all conceptual schemes. For the notion of 'transcendent to our experience' has to be understood *within* a conceptual scheme.



Indeed, internalist pluralism goes so far as to accept that religious statements may be objectively true within the relevant faith-stance. Moreover, the religious phenomena of all traditions are given *prima facie* equal weighting, and none need be re-described in a manner that brings them closer to other traditions. Nor does internalist pluralism have any need to re-describe the core concepts or the goals of any religious tradition. Finally, internalist pluralism has no difficulty in regarding the conceptual schemes of atheists as being on a par with those of religious believers, nor is it compelled to re-describe or put in question atheistic moral motivation. It seems to me that these constitute considerable advantages over other approaches to the plurality of religious and secular belief systems.

In conclusion, then, internalist pluralism succeeds in accounting for the considerable differences between the various world religions, while remaining sensitive to cultural diversity, and while also managing to avoid the pitfalls in John Hick's transcendental religious pluralism. All of this suggests that internalist pluralism constitutes a superior paradigm.

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