Pluralism as a Response to Religious Diversity

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores pluralism as a response to the problem of religious diversity. Since many people do not understand why religious diversity even is a problem, the thesis begins by explaining exactly what the problem of religious diversity is, and why it is such an existential problem for the religious adherent. The problem is shown to consist of multiple sub-problems including a Source Problem, an Unfairness Problem, and three different epistemic problems. Given the magnitude of all these problems combined, the religious adherent desperately requires a solution, and pluralism is the only response that can offer a solution which is broadly acceptable.

The Threefold Model is the industry standard typological structure for describing the three possible religious responses one might have to religious diversity, pluralism being the third. However, using the model is beset with difficulties because it lacks precise, coherent definitions for these three responses. This paper explains why it is so difficult to create such definitions and carefully details the inadequacies of existing ones. It then goes on to painstakingly construct a new set of definitions for these three responses which possess a clarity, symmetry, and coherency that is unmatched in the literature.

In the process of creating these improved definitions, a novel approach to understanding the Threefold Model, using pairs of binary functions is developed. This approach not only shows the inherent value of the Threefold Model, but could allow the Threefold Model to be applied to other similar logical problems.

The thesis then classifies and critically analyses eighteen different types of religious pluralism. This is by far the most comprehensive classification in the literature to date. Each of these pluralisms is assessed for its effectiveness in solving the problem of religious diversity. It is concluded that none of the pluralisms are very successful on this goal, with all found to be lacking in some critical manner.
Finally, utilising the insights gained from analysing so many different pluralistic models, a new model, called Naturalistic pluralism, is developed. This model suffers from none of the serious deficiencies found in other pluralistic models and offers several important attributes, most notably being much more acceptable to the religious adherent, than existing models.
DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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Date: __________ 31 March 2019__
I would like to extend a special thanks to my two supervisors, Professor Graham Oppy and Dr. Monima Chadha. Both were instrumental in helping me to complete this project. Graham’s extraordinary expertise in philosophy of religion allowed him to make insightful comments no matter how far afield I ventured. In addition, he also has the unique ability to find flaws in ideas that no one else even notices. Whenever I thought I had a good idea I would run it past Graham and usually discover that it wasn’t. This was invaluable in determining what went into this thesis, and most importantly, what did not.

Monima’s vast knowledge of all things East was exceptionally helpful in clarifying many of the finer points of topics dealt with in this thesis. She was also essential in suggesting different ways to attack problems and how to structure some of my arguments. Monima was incredibly hard working during the period I produced this thesis, always able to find time and provide input whenever I needed it, despite her busy schedule as head of the department. For this I am extremely grateful.

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I will explore religious diversity, the problems that it causes, and the responses that people adopt when they become cognizant of such diversity. In particular, I will be focusing on the pluralist response to this diversity, because it is the only one of the three responses which has the potential to put forth a broadly acceptable solution. However, that potential has yet to be realised. As this paper will show, none of the existing models of pluralism propose high quality, coherent solutions, and the ones that come closest aren’t broadly acceptable. The most well-known and popular pluralistic model, that of John Hick, turns out to be highly deficient on both of these points. Thus, there seems to be ample opportunity for someone to try and create a better model of pluralism. In 1997 John Hick (p. 163) challenged others to come up with a new form of pluralism which would better explain the religious data. This paper shall now take up that challenge. What follows is an outline of the thesis.

Chapter 1 will begin by discussing the problem of religious diversity and all the difficulties that it causes. I hope to leave the reader with the view that this is an extremely important problem for both the religious and non-religious, and it is in fact, one of the most difficult and urgent issues facing society today.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed analysis of the Threefold Model of Responses to the problem of religious diversity. Here I show that this model suffers from a severe lack of quality definitions for its three responses. In addition, the model is routinely misused by people attempting to apply it to multiple matters simultaneously. I explain how to understand the Threefold Model and use it in an appropriate manner. I then meticulously derive a whole new set of definitions for its three responses which are simple and logically consistent.
Chapter 3 explores eighteen different pluralistic models of religious diversity including relativist, differential, identist, and many others. I classify all the models into various categories, and then using a seven point criteria, detail why each of these models is severely lacking in usefulness.

Chapter 4 summarises my examination of the various pluralistic models, and puts forth an opinion as to the current best model. Then, drawing upon the detailed analysis conducted on each model, a new type of pluralism is developed and explored. This new type of pluralism is compared to the finest existing models on offer, and appears to hold advantages across multiple criteria.
1. THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

There are three reasons why this problem is so important, the first two being material and the third being theological (Race 1993, p. vii). First, and foremost, is the fact that cheap, efficient transport technologies, large scale migration, and mass communications have effectively shrunken the globe, putting people of different religions in closer proximity than ever before. It is now critical that we learn how to understand and react to people of other religions and develop ways to eliminate hatred so we can co-exist with each other. Secondly, global challenges such as resource shortages, income inequality, climate change, nuclear proliferation and other technological risks are increasing daily and we need to cooperate with others to help minimise and potentially solve these problems. Thirdly, religious people of all persuasions need to theologically account for the existence of alternative religions.

This paper will only be dealing with the third, theological/philosophical, problem. However, since the paper is focusing on pluralistic solutions to the problem of religious diversity, any positive results will be immensely useful in dealing with the first two problems.

This third problem is one that theologians and philosophers have been wrestling with for millennia. It is a crucial problem for all religious people to deal with, as it has the potential to greatly undermine religious beliefs. It brings to the forefront the question, if my religion is correct, then why are there so many other religions in radical disagreement? It is this existential problem that is commonly called the problem of religious diversity.

This problem of religious diversity, which would more accurately be termed the problem of religious disagreement, is so intimidating to religious people that Allan Race (1993, p. 3-4) said, our encounters with people of other religions pose an even greater threat to Christianity than the disputes with science. William Alston (1991, p.
255) called the problem of religious diversity “the most difficult problem for my position”¹ and John Hick (1988, p. 16) labels the problem of religious diversity as one of the four main challenges to religious belief.

1.1 Why is the Problem of Religious Diversity a Problem?

One may wonder, exactly why is religious disagreement such a problem for religious people? After all, everyone experiences political disagreement, and philosophers routinely have philosophical disagreements, yet we don’t find them to be particularly troubling issues. And they rarely cause us to abandon our existing views. So what is the difference?

One big difference is that with non-religious disagreement people typically hold that those who disagree with them are mistaken, and thus their own view is not called into question. All these opinions are manmade and someone has to be wrong. But for religious claims, these are usually thought to have originated from God, or whatever ultimate reality you ascribe to. So it is difficult to envision how they could be wrong.

In addition to this information “Source Problem”, religious disagreement produces troubling counterevidence for some of the positive properties the Ultimate is assumed to possess. If other religions somehow misunderstood or corrupted the truths imparted by the Ultimate, how could it just blatantly ignore this issue and let so many people be entangled in such a horrible mistake for so long? And given the massive benefits that religious people claim to receive in this life and beyond, how could a supremely capable Ultimate just leave these people spiritually destitute, and living in

¹ Alston’s position was that God can be known through religious experience.
such profound error that they have no hope of ever freeing themselves from this divine darkness? There is a monumental problem of evil inherent here.\(^2\)

This problem is immeasurably worse than the problem of natural evil which is often said to be the most challenging dilemma religious believers face. There are conceivably many possible reasons why the Ultimate might, for example, let a tsunami overwhelm a village and stand by idly. Perhaps it doesn’t interfere in natural processes, or perhaps some greater good comes to these people or their loved ones. But in this case we are talking about knowledge of the very existence of that Ultimate. What conceivable reason could there be for the Ultimate to want to be hidden or inaccessible to all other religions aside from my own?\(^3\) Knowledge of the Ultimate is the meaning of life for most religious people. How could the vast majority of the planet’s population simply be abandoned and left to wallow in ignorance? Therein lies the problem of religious diversity.\(^4\)

### 1.2 Three Epistemic Difficulties from the Problem of Religious Diversity

In addition to the Source Problem and the Unfairness Problem\(^5\) profiled above, there are three epistemic difficulties that the problem of religious diversity creates for the religious adherent.

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\(^2\) Technically this is not a Problem of Evil but a Problem of Unfairness. However it implies an even more sinister form of the Problem of Evil. For here the issue is not the Ultimate allowing evil, but the Ultimate being evil.

\(^3\) There are some conceivable reasons, but they seem highly implausible compared to natural evil theodicies.

\(^4\) The Source Problem may require a theistic rendition of the Ultimate and the Unfairness Problem almost certainly does. But as we shall see next, there are epistemic problems which apply equally to non-theistic religions.

\(^5\) Another similar but even more compelling argument called the CSR Challenge has been presented. Applying evolutionary theory to the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) Marsh & Marsh (2016) ask, why was the world designed in a manner that causes religious diversity to naturally arise? This is a more serious accusation because here the Ultimate didn’t just allow religious diversity, but actually created it.
Contingency Problem

First is the Contingency Problem which has been around for thousands of years (Bogardus 2013, p. 372) but has its most famous modern depiction in Hick (1997a, p. 281). Here Hick points out that in the great majority of cases, religious allegiance depends upon the “accident of birth”. If you had been born somewhere else you would very likely follow a different religion. Now of course, as Hick points out, this does not mean that your religion’s claims are untrue, but only that most people’s method of adopting a religion is highly inconsistent with that religion’s claims being correct. After all, as any exclusivist would agree, everyone else employing this method of religious selection ends up being highly mistaken. So the Contingency Problem should raise huge doubts in any religious followers mind, or as Hick calls it, “a hermeneutic of suspicion” (p. 281).

Epistemic Peer Problem

The second problem involves becoming aware that people belonging to other religions, whom are every bit as intelligent, as devout, and have considered religious claims as deeply as you have, people that are in every way your epistemic peers, have nevertheless come to conclusions that are in many cases, contradictory to those you hold. How can this be? And in such a situation how can you have any confidence that you are the one that holds the correct beliefs? In an insightful study of religious disagreement, Feldmen (2007) concludes that it is impossible for epistemic peers who have shared their evidence, to reach different conclusions. If they cannot determine who is correct they should suspend judgement. Even if you disagree with Feldmen’s rather strong conclusion, the epistemic peer problem has to appreciably lower a religious person’s level of confidence.

Probabilistic Problem

Finally there is the Probabilistic Problem which was first raised by Schellenberg (1997). The idea here is that nearly all sceptics, and many religious people, agree that
mutually exclusive religious beliefs have roughly similar probabilities of being correct. Since, for any given religious claim, there are so many possible alternatives, then the probability of that one being correct and all the others being false is very low. Even if you believe that your religion’s claims are superior, it would still be difficult to maintain that they are so superior that it overcomes the combined probabilities of all the alternatives combined. Thus the religious follower should attach very little chance to any of their religion’s claims being correct.

These three epistemic problems taken together with the Source Problem and the Unfairness Problem seem to form an overwhelming hurdle for religious belief. The problem of religious diversity all but demands an explanation.

1.3 Who is the Problem of Religious Diversity a Problem For?

I mentioned above that the problem of religious diversity is a problem for religious people. More specifically it is a problem for one set of religious people trying to understand the existence of another disagreeing set of religious people. But one might ask why doesn’t the existence of atheists pose an equally weighty problem for religious people? The answer is the converse of the reason that disagreeing religious people pose a problem; atheists aren’t assumed to garner their knowledge from the Ultimate. So it is easy to explain away atheists by simply concluding they are wrong; they lack something important. Perhaps they have never had a religious experience, or are too cynical and close minded to accept one they have had. Maybe they are not

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Some, such as Plantinga (2000, p. 427-429) contend that these types of epistemic arguments fail because if applied to non-religious matters they would rule out most of those beliefs as well. However, it should be clear that all three of these epistemic arguments have a much stronger application to religious claims. In the Contingency Problem, political or scientific beliefs wouldn’t have anywhere near the levels of correlation to birthplace as does religious belief. In the Epistemic Peer Problem and the Probabilistic Problem, the sheer number of alternative religious views dwarfs anything seen in these non-religious areas. Wallace (1966, p. 3) estimates there have been 100,000 religions on earth since the beginning of man.
in touch with their feelings, or simply lack the ability to imagine things beyond the mundane. Whatever the reason, their existence can easily be attributed to some sort of flaw which they possess.

Similarly the problem of religious diversity does not pose a problem for the atheist either. For them it is the religious people who possess the flaw. The existence of religious diversity is one of the greatest pieces of evidence in favour of their view. All these religious people who believe in something supernatural, can’t even agree on what it is they believe in. If religion is supernaturally derived, then the supernatural powers providing this religious knowledge would at least provide a consistent story. To be sure, if every religious person followed the same religion then there would likely be a lot of worried atheists out there. But in the present situation, the problem of religious diversity only provides fuel for their fire.

Finally, one might ask, what type of religious adherents have a problem of religious diversity? The answer is all religious persons have this problem, but the magnitude of the problem varies widely. As shown above, for theistic religions the problem of religious diversity is a massive existential problem. But for pure non-theistic religions (those that have no Gods whatsoever) there is no Source Problem or Unfairness Problem, so the diversity problem is definitely not existential. It could even be argued that, in such religions, since all truth claims are the product of humans alone, one should expect to see diversity, and therefore religious differences are the same as philosophical or political differences. However, this ignores the enormity of the epistemic problem for religious difference. As footnote 6 points out, the scale of the epistemic problem here is one that is unimaginable in the political or philosophical arenas. Thus, even pure non-theistic religions have a fairly hefty problem of religious diversity that needs to be dealt with.

1.4 Responses to the Problem of Religious Diversity
Given that the problem of religious diversity is such a dilemma for religious people, how should they react to its existence? There are five possible responses. The first response a religious person might take is to give up their religion. Adopt an areligious response – all religions are myths. The logic here is that if all religions except one are false, then why make an exception for that one? It is more likely that all of them are false. As the famous 15th century French philosopher Jean Bodin (1975, p. 256) said, “each is refuted by all.”

The second possible response is one of agnosticism. You could just decide not to think about the problem or form no opinion on the issue. While this response is possible, and perhaps even commonplace amongst the general population, it just avoids the issue and doesn’t offer any solutions. It is definitely not an intellectually adequate response and it is somewhat debateable whether it should even constitute a response.

Finally, there are three possible types of religious responses; notably exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Rough definitions of these terms are as follows. Exclusivism is the view that my religion is the only one that is completely true, and the only one that can deliver salvation. It is exclusive amongst the religions. Inclusivism begins with the same view as exclusivism, namely that my religion is the only one that is true. But then it seeks to include at least some other religions into this exclusive domain by claiming that they also contain a large number of truths and they also can obtain salvation. Finally, pluralism is the view that, somehow, all religions are true and all deliver salvation.

This paper will deal almost solely with this third religious response, pluralism. Assuming religious people are going to be with us for some time to come, pluralism is the only one of the five responses that can offer a solution to the critical global problems outlined earlier. Furthermore, it is the only response that has the potential to provide a broadly acceptable theological account explaining the presence of other religions. Thus, the goal of this paper is to deeply probe into the concept of pluralism
and ask, what does it really mean, does it make any sense, and how can it be made to work?
2. THE THREEFOLD MODEL OF RELIGIOUS RESPONSES

The last three possible responses to the problem of religious diversity mentioned above were first coined by Alan Race (1993, pp. vii-viii) in 1983. He identified the three terms exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism as possible Christian responses to the diversity of religious beliefs and combined them to form a typology of responses, now known as the Threefold Model.

Since Race first introduced the model it has been subjected to a high degree of criticism and this continues to the present day. However, despite all the attacks levelled at it, the model has not only survived for more than 35 years, but become almost a de-facto standard in the literature. It is difficult to find a paper on the problem of religious diversity where the Threefold Model is not mentioned. This is, no doubt due to the fact that, despite numerous attempts, no one has come up with a better model.

2.1 DEFINITIONAL AMBIGUITY

Even though the Threefold Model is, by any standard, the most popular model used in this area, the one big problem with it is that Race never gave precise definitions for any of the responses that make up the typology. Consequently, everyone who has used the model, since it was introduced, has had to rely on either their own definitions, or those of some notable scholar. As a result of this, there is massive confusion about what exactly the terms exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism mean. The literature abounds with original definitions for these words, and some of the variations in meanings are simply astounding. The definition for pluralism is the most ambiguous of the three, with the situation being so bad for this term that there are numerous cases of pluralists being called exclusivists (D’Costa 1996, pp. 225), claims that all pluralists
are actually inclusivists (Knitter 2002, p. 218), that pluralists are less pluralistic than inclusivists (Heim 1995, pp. 129-57), that pluralism is logically impossible (D’Costa 1996, p. 223), and even that pluralism is a subset of exclusivism (van Inwagen 1997, p. 300). The whole body of literature on the problem of religious diversity is a minefield for the unwary, with philosophers routinely talking across each other because neither is using the same definition in their arguments.

Much credit needs to be given to McKim (2012) who wrote a whole book, On Religious Diversity, trying to sort out this quagmire. McKim incalculably advanced this area of research by providing clear, precise, logical definitions for each of these unsettled terms. However, as will be shown below, further changes to the definitions are required to give the whole typology a logical consistency.

The first thing that should be noted about McKim’s work is that for each of these typological responses, McKim actually provides two definitions. He provides one definition about religious truth claims, and another about salvation. So for example, McKim devotes an entire chapter of his book working out a definition for “Exclusivism about Truth” (2012, pp. 14-35) and another entire chapter working out a completely different definition for “Exclusivism about Salvation” (2012, pp. 52-71). This is a good dichotomisation to make, for as McKim points out, truth and salvation are very different subjects, as one can have completely different responses to truth claims and salvation (2012, p. 8). For example, one could be an exclusivist about truth claims, believing that my religion is the only one that is completely correct, but nevertheless be a pluralist about salvation, perhaps believing that the grace of God is such that all will still obtain salvation.

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7 And so are exclusivists, according to Knitter.
8 It seems redundant to talk about ‘truth claims’. After all, what other types of claims are there? But given that this terminology is used almost universally in the problem of religious diversity literature, that tradition will be continued in this paper.
McKim says that the typology can be applied to other subjects besides truth claims and salvation (e.g. provision of ethical guidance, psychological benefit) but decides to focus on these two as being the most important (2012, p. 11).

One of the main problems in the literature, and one of the big reasons definitional ambiguity abounds, is that writers usually don’t make this distinction between truth claims and salvation and then end up conflating the two. So many scholars writing on the topic of religious diversity just assume they are the same thing, or at least close enough to be able to discuss the two at the same time. For example, D’Costa (2000, p. 20) says that “Truth, revelation, and salvation are tightly and explicitly connected.” Schmidt-Leukel (2005, p. 23), after detailing his reinterpretation of the threefold typology, writes that the focus of his typology rests on a claim that, “combines a soteriological (salvic) and an epistemological (knowledge) element”. Then he goes on to add that, “this seems to be typical for religious claims”. Even John Hick (1985, p. 46) states, “I suggest that in fact the truth-claim and the salvation-claim cohere closely together and should be treated as a single package”.

There have been a few scholars over the years who have noticed this subtle, but important distinction. Ian Markham, in 1993 (p. 34) was probably the first to recognise that there was some conflation occurring between terms in the Threefold Model, writing that the typology, “links truth questions with soteriology”. This was an excellent insight. But then he argues that the typology should be replaced with a single option which “transcends the traditional threefold classification” (p. 34). This option is to “accept the pluralist soteriological account, yet affirm the Christian narrative as true” (p. 34). But, why didn’t he recognise that if you disentangle the definitional conflation that was occurring, you can maintain the view he espouses and keep the Threefold Model? This has the added benefit of allowing other views that don’t align to his.
The next scholar to recognise some sort of conflation problem occurring was Tilley, in 1999 (p. 323), where he writes, “the typology ensonces a fundamental confusion because it mixes different genres as if they were the same”. This sounds like he has identified the problem, but then he goes on to state, “the concepts of truth and salvation are construed and linked very differently in each of these approaches” (p. 324). So we see here that in Tilley’s view, the problem is not that salvation and truth claims are conflated; he says they are thought of differently. He thinks the problem is that the different responses in the Threefold Model are incapable of handling truth and salvation in the same manner because they come from different “genre”. He justifies this by explaining that exclusivism and inclusivism are both from theological “genres”, while pluralism originates from a philosophy of religion “genre” and so they handle subjects differently. Thus, it is the handling ability and not the subjects being handled which is where the confusion is taking place. He clarifies his position when he states, “the root issue that the ‘pluralist’ hypothesis addresses is not the issue of salvation, but of designating a universal religious truth” (p. 324). So, he believes that exclusivism and inclusivism are meant to handle aethic issues while pluralism is meant to handle salvic issues. This is an astonishing statement that is at odds with virtually every other philosopher of religion. Nearly all agree, and I’ll be showing below, that pluralism is very good at handling soteriological issues but faces grave difficulties when it comes to truth claims. But clearly Tilley doesn’t see eye to eye with most philosophers as he writes, the typology “treats a position developed in the philosophy of religion as if it had the same logical status as positions developed in theology proper” (p. 325). In short, Tilley deserves credit for being one of the few to realise that there are some serious conflation problems occurring in the usage of the Threefold Model. But he doesn’t appear to have pinpointed exactly what they are.

Finally we get to Paul Rhodes Eddy who in 2017 became the first person to clearly identify the problem occurring in the usage of the typology (pp. 188-90). He calls it the definitional equivocation problem, and using D’Costa’s writings as an example,
carefully shows how if one does not specifically explain the manner in which the typological terms are being applied then writers “can, if not careful, find themselves using the terms in a variety of (often conflicting) ways” (p. 190).

However, even with this fine enunciation of the problem, there is still some room for improvement. For example, Eddy claims that you need to distinguish between three different usages of the typology; (1) general philosophical truth claims, (2) religious truth claims, and (3) soteric issues (p. 189). But why should there be any differentiation between philosophical truth claims and religious truth claims? Aren’t truth claims simply claims that are believed to be true? So why separate them by genre? If we start moving in this direction we might need political truth claims, historic truth claims, and many more. Clearly this is unnecessary.

I can see that Eddy was tempted to make this delineation because he was trying to distinguish D’Costa’s philosophical usage of the typology from the usual assumption of a religious usage. However, the reason for the confusion was not that D’Costa was using the typology in a philosophical manner, but rather that he was using it in a different manner. So there is no need to separate out philosophical truth claims as their own separate category. In fact, there is no need to even attempt to categorise the different uses of the Threefold Model for the purposes of trying to eliminate conflation because, as I shall show below, conflation occurs within the categories as well as between them. What should be taken away from this discussion is that there are many applications for which the Threefold Model can be used and that you need to precisely state the one you are using the model for. Also never assume that the usage for one purpose has any implications for its usage in any other purpose.

The next obvious question is, why is this Threefold Model so difficult to use? Why is there is so much conflation going on and why are all these first rate philosophers

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*D’Costa said all people making claims (including pluralists) are really exclusivists because they believe only their claim is correct (1996, p. 232).*
making these mistakes? To my knowledge nobody has ventured a reason for why this is occurring with such frequency, so I’ll attempt to address this question now.

I think the primary reason there are so many of these definitional equivocations occurring with the Threefold Model is that the logic behind these typological statements can get quite confusing. Firstly, consider that all of the three responses to religious diversity are views that someone adopts, and so they are essentially personal truth claims. Therefore, a typological view about truth claims, say exclusivism about truth claims, is basically a truth claim about truth claims. More precisely, these typological views are second order personal truth claims about groups of first order religious truth claims.

Secondly, religions make many truth claims about salvation, and some of those truth claims concern the fate of religious others in regards to salvation, which is the same matter being addressed when we decide our typological response to salvation. As many of the philosophers quoted above noted, truth claims and salvation really are quite closely linked together. Thus, it is not surprising to see typological discussions about salvation and truth claims often used interchangeably. However, when this happens the ambiguity surrounding these statements becomes quite difficult to untangle, and one could quickly lose sight of the fact that one’s typological response about salvation and truth claims about salvation are really two different subjects. They may usually be in agreement, but there is no reason they need to be, especially considering the variety of truth claims and their susceptibility to numerous interpretations even within one religion.

Another reason for the frequent definitional ambiguity is that writers are not precise in their language. They do not spell out exactly what it is that they are taking a typological view about. Take for example the two phases, “pluralism about truth claims” and “pluralism about salvation”, which McKim (2012, pp. 101-130) spends many pages working out definitions for. Now carefully consider what these phrases
actually mean and how they are different from each other. To begin with, salvation is a state of being, and it is people who obtain this state. So, pluralism about salvation is, stated more precisely, pluralism about *people obtaining* the state of salvation. In contrast, when discussing pluralism about truth claims, it is the claims that are the object of the pluralism, rather than the people. And we are not typically interested in the existence of truth claims, but rather the correctness of those truth claims, or more specifically, which religion is correct in its truth claims. Thus, pluralism about truth claims is, stated more precisely, pluralism about *various religions being correct* in their truth claims. Once stated in a clear precise manner like this, the differences become more apparent. Have a look at the following examples to see some of the traps that await the undiscerning.

You could be:

A pluralist about salvation – you think that many salvations exist. This is not the usually intended meaning of this phrase.

A pluralist about *people obtaining* salvation – you think that many people obtain salvation. But this doesn’t tell us anything about your views on religious diversity because it is possible all the people come from one religion.

A pluralist about *people from various religions obtaining* salvation - you think that people from at least a few different religions obtain salvation. This is what is usually meant when pluralism about salvation is discussed.

A pluralist about religious truth claims – you think that many religious truth claims are made. This is not only a likely unintended meaning but is also a trivial one because you already know that many truth claims are made about almost everything.

A pluralist about the *correctness of* religious truth claims – you think that many religious truth claims are correct. But this doesn’t tell us anything about your views on religious diversity because it is possible all the truth claims come from one religion.
A pluralist about *various religions being correct* in their truth claims – you think that many of the various religions are correct in their truth claims. This is what is usually meant when pluralism about truth claims is discussed.

Then if you were discussing salvation you might be discussing the truth claims made about salvation rather than salvation itself. More accurately you would be discussing *various religions being correct* in their truth claims about salvation, rather than *people from various religions obtaining* salvation. Thus you could be a pluralist about the former, thinking that many of the various religions are correct in their truth claims about salvation, but then to be consistent you could not be a pluralist about the later. This is because many of the various religion’s truth claims about salvation state that followers of other religions don’t obtain salvation, which is the opposite of what a pluralist about *people from various religions obtaining* salvation believes. So you can see how complicated and confusing discussions of these typological subjects can become. Therefore it is imperative when discussing these topics to precisely define what subject you are talking about and never combine two different subjects into the same discussion.

Now that these important points about precision in language and clarity in purpose when using the Threefold Model have been made clear, we can begin analysing different definitions of the responses that scholars have produced. Many who write about the problem of religious diversity offer their own variations for the meanings of the responses in the Threefold Model. Yet surprisingly only a handful of papers dedicated to developing rigorous definitions for these words have been written. However, as previously noted, McKim (2012) wrote an entire 171 page book on the topic, analysing dozens of possible definitions and methodically arriving at his own suggestions. If space were not a limitation I would follow his example and analyse a good sample from the plethora of definitions in the literature, systematically describing the inadequacies of each. But, to stay within my length guidelines I will focus solely upon McKim’s proposed definitions. They may not be the best in every
respect, but there is no doubt they are the most well thought out and fully explained in the literature. Also, it doesn’t really matter where I begin, I’m going to end up with the same final result. But beginning with well-constructed definitions like McKim’s will get me to that final result a whole lot faster. So for the remainder of this chapter I will meticulously analyse and deconstruct each of McKim’s definitions and we will see what conclusions this process leads us to.

There will be lots of definitional mathematics in the remainder of this chapter, so to help make things clear, labels will be given to each definition. The first letter of the label stands for the response (Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism).10 The second letter stands for the subject the response is in regards to (Salvation, Truth Claims), and if more than one claim is necessary, subscripts will denote the claim number. Finally, the definition number will be in parenthesis. So IS₂(3) means the third attempt at a definition for second claim of inclusivism about salvation. When what is believed to be a final definition is reached, the definition number in parenthesis will be replaced by an “F”.

2.2 Responses about Salvation

First let’s start by looking at the threefold responses regarding salvation. I will use the nomenclature typically found in the literature and call these “responses about salvation”. But following the advice above, I want to make it clear that we are actually discussing responses about people from various religions obtaining salvation. McKim (2012) provides the following definitions:

10 Even though this paper is focused on pluralism it is necessary to explore all three definitions because they must be mutually exclusive and must together encompass all possible religious responses.
Exclusivism
ES₁(1) Our tradition alone delivers salvation, and
ES₂(1) Only members of our tradition can achieve salvation (p. 52).

Inclusivism
IS₁(1) Salvation is available to outsiders, and
IS₂(1) Outsiders are not as well situated with respect to salvation as we are (p. 72).

Pluralism
PS₁(1) Salvation is available to outsiders, and
PS₂(1) Outsiders are as well situated with respect to salvation as we are, and we are very well situated, and
PS₃(1) Our religion provides a very good means to salvation; other traditions provide an equally good means, and no tradition does better than we do (in this respect) (p. 124).

Now there is a lot of information that McKim has packed into these definitions. We can see that ES₂(1), IS₁(1), and PS₁(1) are all beneficiary statements describing which groups of people can realise salvation. ES₁(1) and PS₁(1) are means statements reporting which religions offer the means to salvation. And then IS₂(1) and PS₂(1) are situatedness statements detailing how well followers of the religions are placed. Plus there is some additional information buried in these claims as well.

To try and get a better handle on everything that is included in these statements, I’ve created a table to present it all in an easy to understand visual form.
Table 1: McKim’s Salvation Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Matters</th>
<th>Exclusivism</th>
<th>Inclusivism</th>
<th>Pluralism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Religion Provides a Means</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religions Provide a Means</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranking of the Means</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Equal or Worse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of the Means</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Very Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followers My Religion Can Achieve</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followers Other Religions Can Achieve</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranking of Situatedness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mine Best</td>
<td>All Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Situatedness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Very Well</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows the three different groups of matters raised (means, beneficiaries, situatedness) on the left, with these subdivided into the specific matters detailed. The information provided about a particular matter, for each of the three possible responses (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism) is then listed under their respective columns. Blank cells indicate no information provided.

Glancing at this table again we can see that it is quite complicated and displays little symmetry. I have highlighted in different colours the information which distinguishes the pairs of responses from each other. Technically, no more information than this is required to differentiate the three responses, so there appears to be an abundance of surplus information as well.

2.2.1 Exclusivism about Salvation

Beginning with McKim’s means claim for exclusivism:

ESi(1) Our tradition alone delivers salvation.
We should be clearer about what is meant by “tradition” and call it “religious tradition”, or better yet, just “religion”. Also, the set of people included in the group “our” is ambiguous, so it should be replace it with “my” which leaves no doubt.

ES₁(2) My religion alone delivers salvation.

Because this is a means statement it would be better if we use the word “means” in the claim. So we will replace “delivers” with “provides a means”, and we will add “to obtain” to make it clear what the means is providing.

ES₁(F) My religion alone provides a means to obtain salvation.

Next is the exclusivist beneficiaries statement.

ES₂(1) Only members of our tradition can achieve salvation.

Mirroring the changes made in the means definition, I will replace “our tradition” with “my religion”. Also some religions don’t believe that one can achieve salvation but rather that is it freely given to one. So “obtain” will be substituted for “achieve”.

ES₂(2) Only members of my religion can obtain salvation.

One is usually considered a member of whatever religion they claim to be a member of, and few religions would attest that all of their members obtain salvation. So it is not really the membership of the tradition that gets you the salvation, but rather applying or following the means. The definition should be slightly altered to reflect this.

ES₂(3) Only followers of my religion can obtain salvation.

Finally, let’s move the subject out to the front of the sentence and replace the word “only” with “alone” so this claim has symmetry with the means claim.

ES₂(F) Followers of my religion alone can obtain salvation.
This beneficiary claim is what most people have in mind when they refer to exclusivism about salvation, and it seems like it could stand by itself. This is further supported by looking at Table 1 which shows the beneficiary claim, highlighted in three colours, being the differentiator which distinguishes exclusivism from the other two responses. In contrast the means claims aren’t even contrasted with inclusivism and so do no work in this regard. Thus, this means claim appears unnecessary.

But McKim believes that you need to add the exclusivist means claim to prevent the situation where only members of my tradition can obtain salvation, even though there are many other traditions that provide a means to salvation. However, this seems like a nonsensical case, with McKim even admitting it is “curious”. If there really were many different religions providing a means to salvation, then it wouldn’t be the case that only members of my tradition could obtain salvation. You can’t reasonably claim that a religion provides a means if no person is ever able to utilise it. Therefore this situation does not need to be considered and so the means claim is redundant.

When most people use only a beneficiary statement to discuss exclusivism about salvation, in their minds they have just assumed the means statement. What I have shown here is that their intuition is correct because the means statement is implied by the beneficiary statement. Furthermore, we said at the start we were developing definitions for responses about people from various religions obtaining salvation. This means statement tells us nothing about people obtaining salvation. Thus, a better rendition of exclusivism about salvation would be to drop the first claim and only have one claim. However, it’s a good idea to keep that means claim for reasons that will be explained later.

2.2.2 Inclusivism about Salvation

Inclusivism about salvation’s first claim is a beneficiary statement which is fairly straightforward.
ISi(1) Salvation is available to outsiders.

This is the only claim that distinguishes inclusivism from exclusivism as is shown by the line with three colours in Table 1. Studying this claim in more detail, it is obvious that it is in need of some revision. It seems there could be some doubt about whether salvation is available to insiders; followers of my religion. This deficiency also shows up in Table 1 where you can see that for the “followers of my religion can achieve” matter, inclusivism is blank. So an affirmation that my religion is contained in this group as well, should be given.

ISi(2) Salvation is available to followers of my religion as well as outsiders.

The term “outsiders” is somewhat ambiguous, and needs clarification. By outsiders McKim means religious outsiders. Inclusivism is the idea that other religions can be included within my religion giving their followers access to salvation. So inclusivism isn’t going to extend to the areligious who don’t follow any religion. Thus we can replace “outsiders” with “those who follow other religions”.

ISi(3) Salvation is available to followers of my religion as well as those who follow other religions.

But inclusivism would probably not be thought of as including followers of all other religions. It quite conceivable that some religions are just so radically different, perhaps in what are perceived as highly negative ways, that they simply cannot be included within my religion. So let’s adjust our definition so that it doesn’t include all other religions.

ISi(4) Salvation is available to followers of my religion, as well as some and perhaps many, other religions.
Next, let’s change the wording to make it similar to that used in exclusivism, so “is available to” becomes “can be obtained by”. This provides a nice symmetry across the definitions.

ISi(5) Salvation can be obtained by followers of my religion, as well as some and perhaps many, other religions.

Finally, let’s move the subject out to the front of the sentence as we did on the exclusivist claim.

ISi(F) Followers of my religion, as well as some and perhaps many, other religions, can obtain salvation.

The second inclusivist claim is:

ISii(1) Outsiders are not as well situated with respect to salvation as we are.

Looking at Table 1, it is clear that some second claim is necessary to distinguish inclusivism from pluralism because both have the same beneficiary claim. So to draw out this distinction, McKim is forced add an additional claim regarding a different matter (situatedness), thus breaking the rule which I spent many pages above explaining, that you should never mix different matters together.¹¹

However, it is simply the nature of inclusivism, that it is a hybrid response differing with exclusivism on one matter (beneficiaries) and differing with pluralism on another matter (means), which requires both matters to be simultaneously raised to distinguish itself properly. One could argue that eliminating inclusivism from the typology and keeping matters separate, would create a much better model, and I

¹¹ I actually said you should never mix subjects together, but this rule applies to the individual matters of each subject as well. Ideally we should only be comparing one specific matter at a time.
would whole-heartedly agree. If this occurred we would only have exclusivists and pluralists about the means of salvation, and exclusivists and pluralists about the beneficiaries of salvation. Then inclusivists could mean people who are exclusivists about the means of salvation and pluralists about the beneficiaries of salvation.

Unfortunately, that is not going to happen. The Threefold Model has been around too long, is too well-established, and people are too attached to referring to the three different responses, to ever get rid of it. We just need to accept the Threefold Model for what it is; a complicated unwieldy combination of concepts that could have been described so much more simply, and get on with the job of using it in the best way we can. And that is my purpose here now, to define exactly how this model can best be used. But given its ubiquity, we must be careful not to stray too far from the traditional concepts the Threefold Model espouses.

Returning to the second claim, why add a statement introducing situatedness? And this claim is especially problematic because it is not related to the religions themselves, so it is not even clear that it has anything to do with religion. There could be other reasons completely independent of religion for why the followers of my religion are better situated.

One would have expected to see a means claim here because inclusivism and pluralism are usually thought to differ regarding means to salvation, but McKim never provides any information about the means to salvation in his inclusivism definition (Table 1 is blank in this area). Instead we are presented with this idea of situatedness without any explanation for why this third concept is even necessary. However, the reason becomes evident further in the chapter on inclusivism about salvation.

Here (pp. 72-89) he points out that there are many different versions of inclusivism, each having a particular take on why outsiders can obtain salvation and how my religion is better situated. He then proceeds to describe no less than six different
versions of inclusivism. The important point about these six different versions is that they don’t agree with each other about the means to salvation. Some imply that my religion is the only means to salvation and some imply that other religions have means. Therefore, accepting all these subtypes of inclusivism, it is impossible to come to a conclusion about how inclusivism treats the matter of means to salvation. So McKim is left to find some third category in which to differentiate inclusivism from pluralism. He selects situatedness for this task.

This turns out to be a regrettable decision, as it was never necessary to make this move away from inclusivist claims about the means to salvation. To see why let’s take a closer look at the six different subtypes of inclusivism detailed by McKim. They are as follows:

1. Piggyback – Salvation can only be obtained via my religion, but you may be able to access my religion through your own.

2. Anonymous Membership – Salvation can only be obtained by acting as a member of my religion, but it is possible to act as a member even if you don’t know it.

3. Best Route – My religion offers the best route to salvation.

4. Derivative Powers – Other religions derive their capacity to deliver salvation from my religion.

5. Best Seat in the House – My religion delivers a better quality salvation than other religions.

6. Best Show in Town – My religion delivers a different, but better quality salvation than other religions.

Beginning with the last two subtypes, neither of these views should even be on this list. The Best Seat in the House view is raising a completely different matter. The topic we are addressing is the beneficiaries of salvation. We also might consider the means
to salvation a topic, given we were forced to mix the two matters. But the Best Seat in
the House view has nothing to do with beneficiaries or means. Rather it is focused on
the quality of salvation after the means has already gotten you there. This is an
altogether different topic that one could have views on which are completely
independent from their views on our two matters.

The Best Show in Town view suffers from an even worse problem. If other religions
are accessing completely different salvations then don’t worry about mixing matters.
We are not even talking about the same topic. In the whole typology of responses
about salvation, it is always understood that the salvation in question is the salvation
of the home religion. If you want to consider different types of salvation then each of
these should be a whole new topic. It is quite possible that one could be an exclusivist
about their own religion’s salvation but a pluralist about some other type of salvation,
or vice versa. And of course, as in one of the examples above, one could be an
exclusivist or pluralist on the subject of salvation itself, and whether there are more
than one.

Jumping up to the Best Route view, this one does stick to one matter, means claims.
But it should not be on this list because it is a pluralist claim. It is stating that there are
multiple independent routes (means). This is a pluralist idea and it conflicts with the
inclusivist notion of my religion being the only means. At this point one might ask,
does inclusivism really incorporate the idea of my religion being the only means?
McKim certainly doesn’t think that it does. So, what reasons are there for believing
this is the case?

First, multiple independent means just sounds like pluralism. If religions can offer an
independent means to salvation then why is there the need for any inclusion? What is
it that will be included?

Second, this is contradictory to the original idea of inclusivism as developed by Alan
Race. He said inclusivism “rejects [other religions] as not being sufficient for salvation
apart from Christ” (1993, p. 38). This leaves no doubt that there isn’t an independent means of salvation. There is a good reason why inclusivism is often referred to as “exclusivism light.” It is still very much exclusivist about the means to salvation, but simply more flexible in regards to the beneficiaries.

One might try a different tack, saying the Best Route view doesn’t sound very pluralistic, with one religion claiming to be the best. Why don’t we define inclusivism as my religion offering the best means rather than the only means? This is kind of what McKim is hinting at with his best situated statement, and it would allow the Best Route view to remain in the inclusivist camp.

There are several reasons why this cannot be done. First, it is still contradictory to what Race had in mind when he created inclusivism. He didn’t say other religions were less able to independently obtain salvation. He said they were unable.

Second, differentiating inclusivism and pluralism with a “best means”, “no best means” set of claims adds more complexity as it introduces two new matters into the equation instead of just one, breaking the don’t mix matters rule twice. The claim that my religion offers the best means, is really two claims; an existence of means claim and a ranking of means claim. So not only does it say inclusivism and pluralism both allow for other religions to have a means to salvation. It also says that my religion offers the higher quality means. There is no reason to add complications and break more rules when differentiating on just the existence of a means will do the job.

Finally, the Best Route view seems to fit poorly into the pluralistic camp only because two new matters were mixed into the definition. If the matter being discussed is the existence of a means to salvation then it clearly is a pluralist view and no one would question this. But the question regarding how the religions rank in terms of their means to salvation is a different matter altogether, and the Best Route view takes an exclusivist stance on this matter (mine is best). Thus the reason the Best Route view seems misplaced in the pluralist camp is because two different, somewhat conflicting
matters have been conflated together and attempted to be stuck into one response camp.

Having eliminated these three views from the inclusivist list, this is a good point to consider whether there are any other inclusivist subtypes that should be added to the list. To investigate this I’ll examine another categorisation of inclusivism, being the division between constitutive and normative inclusivism which were first developed by Peter Schineller (1976). Constitutive inclusivism is the view that it is my religion itself which is the means by which the followers of other religions can obtain salvation (p. 552-553). Using Christianity as an example, it is Jesus himself who provides salvation. Without Jesus there could be no salvation. Normative inclusivism is the view that my religion is the norm or standard by which other religions can be measured (p. 556). Other religions could provide a means to salvation if they follow the norms of my religion, or if they are a close enough representation of my religion. For this reason normative inclusivism is sometimes called representative inclusivism (Vélez de Cea 2013, p. 24). So, for example, in normative inclusivism if another religion was faithful to the concepts espoused by Jesus, say believing in the salvic, loving nature of God, then the followers of this religion could obtain salvation, without any help from Jesus himself.

Examining the three remaining inclusivist subtypes (Piggyback, Anonymous Membership, Derivative Powers) it is easy to see that all of them are types of constitutive inclusivism. None of them follow templates of my religion or try to adhere to certain standards of my religion. They all require my religion itself to be able to obtain salvation. Strangely there isn’t an example of a normative view on this list. But surely there should be. I can suggest two possible subtypes. The first I would call the Sufficient Similarities view. This would be the view that some of the important aspects of my religion have sufficiently similar aspects in the other religions, so as to qualify them to offer a means to salvation. The second one I would call the Sufficient Quantity View, which is that the other religions contains a sufficient number of aspects which
are the same as my religion, so as to qualify them to offer a means to salvation. Reviewing what has just been said, we can now adopt the following diagram of inclusivist subtypes.

**Diagram 1: Inclusivism Subtypes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Piggyback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constitutive</td>
<td>Anonymous Membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Derivative Powers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusivism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sufficient Similarities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normative</td>
<td>Sufficient Quantities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considering these five inclusivist subtypes it is clear that all of them are dependent upon my religion for salvation. Thus only my religion offers a means to salvation. Once this fact is understood we can use this means claim to differentiate inclusivism from pluralism and dispense with the rather unusual situatedness claims.

Therefore, replacing the situational claim IS₂(1) with the same means claim used for exclusivism yields:

\[ IS₂(F) \] My religion alone provides a means to obtain salvation.

### 2.2.3 Pluralism about Salvation

Now let’s consider pluralism. You can see from Table 1 that McKim’s pluralism definitions continue with the situatedness claims, but also add a slew of new means related claims. Given that I eliminated the situatedness claims for inclusivism, I will
be able to get rid of them here as well. Then I will be left with the task of determining if all the means related information is necessary. Beginning with the first claim of pluralism about salvation, we see that it is exactly the same as the first claim of inclusivism about salvation.

PSi(1) Salvation is available to outsiders.

This seems entirely correct that they should share the same first claim because both inclusivism and pluralism believe that salvation is not confined to just one religion. But, I reworked the wording of the inclusivist claim above to improve several aspects, so this should be done for the pluralism claim as well.

PSi(F) Followers of my religion, as well as some and perhaps many, other religions, can obtain salvation.

The second claim of pluralism about salvation comes next.

PSz(1) Outsiders are as well situated with respect to salvation as we are, and we are very well situated.

Here the claim begins exactly as the second claim of inclusivism about salvation, except that the word “not” is removed, thus creating a contradictory pair. This combination of claims does the work of differentiating inclusivism and pluralism, but now this is handled by means claims instead. So, as just mentioned above, these situatedness claims can be eliminated.

Unlike the case of inclusivism, I don’t need to replace the discarded situational claim with my own means statement, for McKim has provided a pluralist means statement in the very next claim.
PS3(1) Our tradition provides a very good means to salvation; other traditions provide an equally good means, and no tradition does better than we do (in this respect).

The first clause in this statement, that “our tradition provides a very good means”, immediately raises questions. Why is there a need to include this phrase? Neither of the definitions for exclusivism or inclusivism say anything about the quality of the means. You can see on Table 1 that this pluralist information on the quality of the means matter looks like an orphan standing there all by itself. It doesn’t seem to be doing any work at all. So why is it mentioned?

McKim doesn’t shed much light on this, but there is some discussion about this extra clause in his section on pluralism about truth claims. Here he says that we need to add a clause like this to rule out the possibility that none of the religions do very well. The view with “none of them doing very well does not have a place in the discussion. It is neither inclusivism nor pluralism, and it certainly is not exclusivism” (p. 102). He goes on to label this view “pessimism”. So basically, this view does not even fit within the Threefold Model.

I agree with McKim here. Recall that the Threefold Model encompasses religious responses to religious diversity. If you thought none of the religions did a good job in regards to truth claims then you wouldn’t remain a follower of any religion. You would adopt some other nonreligious world view that you thought did do a good job regarding its truth claims. So this would not be a religious response and therefore would not fit into the Threefold Model.

However, this logic can’t be similarly applied to salvation. Even if your religion was doing a terrible job, say only saving 10% of its followers, but there is no other religion that does better, you have no place else to turn. Unlike with truth claims, adopting a nonreligious view isn’t going to put you in a better position. Only religions make salvation possible. So, in the salvation case you would just accept the terrible 10%
success rate and stick with your religion because some salvations are better than no salvations. This accords well with many religious doctrines which teach that it is very difficult to obtain salvation (e.g. only a select few will make it, the path to heaven is a narrow one, it takes uncountable lifetimes, and so on). Thus, it is unnecessary to have this clause requiring that your religion has a very good means to salvation. Removing it yields:

PS3(2) Other traditions provide an equally good means to salvation, and no tradition does better than we do (in this respect).

The final clause, “no tradition does better than we do”, seems superfluous at first glance. If, as the first clause says, other traditions provide equally good means, then it is not possible for them to do better than we do. So, obviously “other traditions” does not mean all other traditions. If some traditions weren’t equal then potentially they could be better, and thus you would need the final clause to exclude this possibility. This “less than all” interpretation of other traditions makes sense as it is open to the pluralist to decide how pluralistic they really want to be. Few pluralists would want to extend their pluralism to all other religions. Most people are aware of certain cults or groups of people claiming to be a religion, but exhibiting few of the moral properties found in the major religions, and they would not attribute them as having the means of salvation. Another example is that some people might be completely monotheistic and so only want to extend their pluralism to the monotheistic religions. The possibilities are endless.

But even so, there seems little reason for having this final clause. You can see this in Table 1 where the Ranking of the Means matter looks to be another orphan category doing no work at all in relating pluralism to the other responses. So, we should ask ourselves if there is something about pluralism which necessitates this clause. Can I still be a pluralist if some other religion offers a better means than mine?
Of course you can. First, even though you accept the possibility that another religion has a better means than your religion, you might not know if that is actually the case. Given the uncertainties surrounding religious claims and salvation, it is expected that you would not know if this was true or not. So you would be perfectly justified in sticking with your religion even though another religion has a better means. Second, even if you did know, you might decide to switch to that other religion, but this is not guaranteed. You might decide that you have been a follower of your current religion for too long to change, or that you have so many cultural and social ties to it that it is not worth changing even if its means is inferior. Either way, there is nothing stopping you from holding a pluralist view that other religions could, or even do, offer a means to salvation superior to that of my own.

Another point to consider is the specific topic under discussion. We have been focused on pluralism about *various religions having the means* for salvation. Clearly this only informs us that other religions possess an independent means to salvation. It needn’t tell us anything about the absolute or relative quality of that means. You could create a different topic to discuss these issues; namely, the *various religion’s quality of means* for salvation. But, of course, you would already have to be a pluralist about our original topic to even get involved in this new topic.

Finally, making claims about no religion having a better means than my religion sounds much more exclusivist in character than pluralist. So this final clause should be removed.

PSi(3) Other traditions provide an equally good means to salvation as our tradition.

What’s left now is an equal means claim and I will argue that introducing this into pluralism is a disastrous idea. It destroys symmetry across the claims, creates complexity by adding additional unnecessary categories, and is impossible to justify.
Taking up the last of these criticisms first, what justification is there for putting an equal means claim into pluralism? McKim says absolutely nothing on this front. He begins the chapter on pluralism by stating, “The main focus of this chapter is on the claim that a number of religions do equally well in terms of truth” (p. 101). Reading further in the chapter we find out they are also equal in terms of salvation and equal in terms of any other subject you might want to consider. McKim even provides a couple of other people’s definitions of pluralism that say that the religions are equal in some manner. In every way, the reader is left with the impression that being equal is just what pluralism means.

The trouble is that pluralism does not mean equal. It contains the root “plural” which means more than one. It does not imply anything about being equal. Yet most philosophers think pluralism has something to do with religions being equal and McKim is definitely not alone here. I would estimate, based upon my research, that 95% of all philosophers use the word pluralism to mean some type of equality about religions. But how did pluralism get to have this meaning if there is no basis for it?

One thing for sure is that it did not originate with the founder of the Threefold Model. When discussing his newly conceived “pluralist theory”, Alan Race states, “But we have been careful to stress that this framework does not imply that all faiths are equally true or are the same” (1993, p140). And if that wasn’t clear enough, three pages later he writes, “It is necessary to repeat: I have not accepted the view that all faiths are equally true, or of equal value, or are ultimately saying the same thing” (p 143).

My view is that this problem relates to John Hick. In his extensive writings he routinely makes pronouncements of religious equality, labelling all the great traditions, “equally effective” (2004, p. 369), saying all religions are equally “paths to a supremely good fulfilment in relation to the ultimate transcendent reality” and even going so far to claim this last quote “is the pluralist view” (2010, p. vii). While Hick was not the first one to associate pluralism with equality of religions, he was by far
the most prominent. David Cheetham (2016, p. 169) says about Hick’s project, “his work represents probably the most systematic and thorough attempt at constructing a harmonious pluralistic model in western thought”. In short, Hick’s pluralist theory is so dominant amongst such theories that Hick has come to represent pluralism. So when Hick says all religions are equal, and this is the pluralistic view, everyone else blindly follows. These days it is almost impossible to find a definition of pluralism that doesn’t involve equality of some type. Indeed it is truly amazing to see how many philosophers, when needing a definition for pluralism, just straight out quote Hick, without even changing a single word.

But of course, none of this is Hick’s fault. In fact, he doesn’t even agree with what most people understand pluralism to be. Hick is only a pluralist in the narrowest sense of the word. His view is simply that religions are equally effective “for the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness” (2004, p. 369). He is not in any way a pluralist about truth claims. In fact, he thinks just about all important religious truth claims are false. He is not really a pluralist about the beneficiaries of salvation nor the means to salvation. He is only a pluralist about religions having the means to perform a specific type of transformation. That transformation might be John Hick’s salvation but it is not going to represent salvation for most religions.

Even if you are tempted to buy into Hick’s version of salvation, a closer analysis raises problems. This doesn’t really seem like it could be a salvation. This is a reorientation, a shift of focus. Salvation is something that happens to a person. You go to heaven, you are released from Samsara, or you obtain Nirvana. These aren’t reorientations. Thus I am inclined to think that Hick’s reorientation is something that is necessary to obtain salvation, or perhaps makes it more likely that you obtain salvation, than to consider that it is salvation.
Furthermore, whatever he is pluralistic about, it isn’t a very broad pluralism. He confines his views exclusively to the “great traditions”. That group only includes about a half-dozen, or so, religions, and they are confined to but a tiny slice of time in the history of humankind. So, all we can say with certainty is that Hick is a pluralist about a few great traditions having the means to reorient you away from self-centeredness. That is one narrow type of pluralism. It seems scholars have been more influenced by Hick’s broader message of pluralism, than the fine details of his work.

Now that I have shown that Hick is only a pluralist in the most nominal of senses, we don’t need to worry about adopting a definition of pluralism that is different to his, or more accurately, what we think his might be. Eddy points out, in the current literature the definitions of the Threefold Model terms “are clearly focused upon the question of truth-claims” (2017, p. 186) for many scholars. Since Hick is not a pluralist about this subject at all, this is even more reason to justify an independent definition of pluralism. So, now that we have rid ourselves of Hicks overwhelming influence on the meaning of pluralism, let’s think about this idea of religions being equal in various subjects to see if it makes any logical sense.

As I said earlier, I think this idea of religions being equal is terribly misplaced. Firstly, what justification is there for accepting this view? Hick states over and over again, how religions are equally effective for his tiny little narrow criteria. But, even here he almost always precedes his remarks with a phrase along the lines of “so far as we can tell” (2004, p. xxvi). This is highly illuminating because the point he is perhaps trying to subtly slide past us is that we can’t tell. He is correct in saying as far as we can tell the religions are equally effective, but would be just as correct to say, as far as we can tell religions are not equally effective. There is no evidence either way.

Furthermore, it is difficult to even imagine how there could be evidence. How could you ever begin to measure the transformation of ones thoughts away from self-centeredness towards the Real? Using other non-Hickian types of pluralism, how
could we possibly measure if the means for salvation in different religions was equally effective? This is especially the case given none of the religions (or Hick) can even agree on what the salvation, that these means are trying to get us to, actually is.

If we consider something like pluralism about the beneficiaries of salvation, then this seems like it has more potential to be measured. After all it is a binary function. Presumably you either obtain salvation or you don’t. But even in this case, how do we know who did and didn’t obtain it? Hick is very fond of promoting the concept of eschatological verification (e.g. 2004, p. 180), and that makes some sense. But it does nothing to help us make statements now about the equality of religions. In short, there is just no way to gather evidence to support this claim.

Secondly, let’s assume that somehow there was a way to measure such matters as the means of salvation. There is almost no chance they will be found to be equal. What science has shown us about physical reality is that the more accurate our measurement tools become, the less equality there is. There is almost nothing that turns out to be perfectly equal. Even if we consider binary matters such as beneficiaries of salvation, it would be extraordinary if this criteria, when measured over billons of people and calculated to dozens of decimal places, turned out to show the exact same percentage of people for all the different religions.12 This would be so astounding that it would serve more as a proof that something was allocating salvations equally than the religions actually being equal.13 So, even if such matters were measurable, it seems nothing short of fanciful to claim that they are equal.

Thirdly, this pluralist view breaks distributional symmetries and posits an arrangement of outcomes which is completely unnatural. The pluralist position typically begins by assuming religions are equal in some matter. But then, the vast

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12 It is actually mathematically impossible unless the numbers of beneficiaries of the larger group happens to be factorable into the number of beneficiaries of the smaller group.
13 It would be like flipping a coin 1 million times and getting a result of 500,000 heads and 500,000 tails. The chances of this happening are incredibly small. The point here is that even things that we expect to be equal rarely turn out to be exactly equal.
majority of pluralists claim that not all religions are equal. Some don’t measure up. This assumption thus this leaves religions with a highly unusual distribution, having a group of religions in a uniform distribution at some maximum level, and then the remaining religions, those not making the grade, being distributed across the lower levels all the way down to zero.\textsuperscript{14} As far as I am aware, such a distribution is unheard of in nature. So there appears to be no rationale for thinking that religious matters should fall into such a distribution.

Fourthly, this interpretation of pluralism creates unnecessary categories and adds unwanted complexity to the definition. Pluralism about salvation ends up having to make the claims that some people will obtain salvation, and that some religions provide equal means to salvation. But the first group (the beneficiaries) is bigger than the followers of the second group (religions with equal means). This makes pluralism more complicated and difficult to understand. It creates this additional category of people, the people who belong to a religion that isn’t quite equal in means but still provides enough means for them to obtain salvation.\textsuperscript{15} Because all the emphasis in pluralism is on the group of religions having equal means, this second group just ends up getting forgotten.\textsuperscript{16} They may strike some notice using my definitions, but they definitely fall between the cracks with everyone else’s definitions. Removing this assumption of equality eliminates all these problems.

\textsuperscript{14} It is possible means to salvation could be distributed in a binary fashion so you either provide a means or you don’t, and this would be a distribution seen in nature. However such matters don’t seem like they should be of the binary type. If a religion proscribes a set of believes or actions that allow you to obtain salvation, and then another religion proscribes just one less of these beliefs or actions, would that cause its effectiveness to drop to zero, i.e. it has no means to salvation? It seems much more plausible that it should gradually become less effective (inferior in means) the fewer of these salvation causing actions or beliefs it contains. Thus the distribution of religious means would never be a binary one.

\textsuperscript{15} I am assuming here, from the previous point, that the salvic means capabilities of religions doesn’t fall into a binary distribution. If it did pluralism would be even more difficult to understand.

\textsuperscript{16} I suspect most people have never considered the binary distribution problem and thus aren’t even aware of the potential for religious followers to even reside in this category. But McKim’s definitions clearly allow for that possibility.
Fifthly, the addition of this religious equality assumption adds nothing to the theory of pluralism. It is difficult to understand why this assumption ever was added to the concept of pluralism in the first place. Take Hick’s pluralism for example. Subtracting the idea of equality doesn’t have any substantial impact on the theory. You still have all the religions groping around in the dark, trying to comprehend the ineffable Real. Because the Real is ineffable the religions still make many false claims and that explains the diversity of religions. All the great traditions are still efficacious in achieving Hick’s claimed goal, to transform attitudes away from self-centeredness and towards the Real. If some religions happen to be better at this than others, it makes little difference. Hick’s theory is completely unaffected. In fact it is improved because the theory is now more believable. Why would you ever think that all religions accomplish this task with perfectly equivalent efficiency? Surely some practices must be better than other practices at transforming people’s attitudes.

So why did Hick unnecessarily throw this equality constraint into the definition of pluralism? And why do other scholars continue to do the same? Religions don’t have to be equal at all, and as we have seen, attempting to make them equal is not only unwarranted, doing so creates many problems.

I have two theories about why this is routinely done. The first comes from an observation of having read dozens of non-philosophical books and articles saying that all religions are good and then shortly thereafter saying that all religions are equally good. It almost seems as if the first claim implies the second. So, I think in the minds of those disposed towards a pluralist view, such as the writers of this material, all religions really are equal. To try and understand how this incorrect view came about, consider the following thought process. The intuitive understanding that many people have about religions is that they are all, in some way, good, say in promoting moral values. Next, these people then probably have the thought that they are all equal because they are good. What they really mean here is that they are all equal in having the property of being a member of this good group which promotes moral values. But
that can easily become confused with the idea that all members of this group are equally good at promoting moral values.

To see this another way, consider an exercise analogy. If your goal is cardiovascular fitness, then running, cycling and swimming are all very good for you. Many people walk around with the view that they are all equally good. They could probably even be labelled exercise pluralists. But, if pressed, most of them would likely admit that they are not really equally good. If you measure with enough precision you will surely find that one of these exercises gets you to the goal a bit faster than the others. What they really mean is that all the exercises are good at getting you to your goal and they are equal in the sense that they all have this property of being good at getting you to your goal. So I believe this conflation of concepts might explain how such an idea can become embedded in people’s minds.

My second thought is simply that people want this to be true. It would be good if this was true. It has a nice warm politically correct feel about it and it would help people of various religions get along better with each other. There would be no possibility of people carrying around a superiority mindset, and it instantly eliminates the question of which religion is better as even a topic for discussion. But, we can’t let our wishes influence the facts. That is just letting the tail wag the dog. And the facts clearly show that there is no reason to believe religions are in any way equal.

At this point you might be wondering, if there is no equality in pluralism, then one of the religions has to be superior, right? Well yes, that is true. But the important point to recognise is that we don’t know which one. Pluralist followers of the various religions are entitled to live their lives believing that their religion is superior, and many actually do (Vélez de Cea 2013, p. 25). But the reality is that this belief is completely an act of faith on their part, and they would be much better served by adopting a position of humility on this issue. The fact of the matter is that nobody really knows which religion is superior in means, and as discussed above, it is likely
impossible to know. So this claim of equality, lacking even a single shred of evidence, is definitely not one that should be built into any definition. Instead, what these new definitions that I’ve worked out show, is that pluralism is a view about sufficiency rather than equality.

Hopefully I’ve now convinced you that religions do not have to be equal in means and therefore this should not form part of the definition for pluralism. So we can remove this equality constraint from PS₃(3) above, giving us:

PS₃(4) Other traditions provide a means to salvation, as does our tradition.

Applying the same changes I have made to other definitions above; changing “our” to “my”, “tradition” to “religion”, moving “my religion” to the beginning, and clarifying that we are not talking about all other religions, leaves us with:

PS₃(F) My religion, as well as some and perhaps many other religions, provide a means to obtain salvation.

2.2.4 Salvation Definitions for the Threefold Model

That just about concludes my definitions for the responses about salvation. There is just one final issue to address. Recall that “responses about salvation” was just shorthand for the more precise matter being discussed, “responses about people from various religions obtaining salvation”. As mentioned previously, this is usually what people have in mind when they raise the topic of salvation in the context of the Threefold Model. But another closely related and important matter is responses about various religions having the means for salvation. And it turned out, because of the peculiar nature of inclusivism¹⁷, to be essential that we include this second matter into

¹⁷ Inclusivism is a combination view involving two matters.
our definition as well. So, despite beginning our discussion focusing on the single matter of *people from various religions obtaining* salvation we were forced to juggle two matters at once and simultaneously discuss *various religions having the means* for salvation. Thus it no longer makes sense to say our topic is *people from various religions obtaining* salvation. Our topic now has a pair of matters. When specifying the topic, we could spell out both of these in their full detail, but since both of them relate to salvation, it seems appropriate to simply refer to the topic as “Responses about Salvation”. Because there could be other matters about salvation which would fit into this broad topic, it may sometimes be necessary to spell out the specific matters in full. But, given that these are, by far, the most commonly discussed salvation matters in relation to the Threefold Model, this will probably only rarely be required.

Given that our topic now contains two matters, it makes sense to include the full definitions for both matters. Recall earlier there was a means claim for exclusivism which was superfluous for defining the response about *people from various religions obtaining* salvation, but I recommended saving it for later. This is the reason. It is required for defining the response about *various religions having the means* for salvation. Since that is now part of our topic, this statement must remain.

I finish by listing all these new definitions together so the entire typological structure regarding salvation can be seen. I have placed the means statements first and have italicised a critical word or phrase in each definition to highlight the differences between the definitions.
Responses about Salvation

Exclusivism

1) My religion alone provides a means to obtain salvation.

2) Followers of my religion alone can obtain salvation.

Inclusivism

1) My religion alone provides a means to obtain salvation.

2) Followers of my religion, as well as some and perhaps many other religions, can obtain salvation.

Pluralism

1) My religion, as well as some and perhaps many other religions, provide a means to obtain salvation.

2) Followers of my religion, as well as some and perhaps many other religions, can obtain salvation.

Table 2 below shows the definitions in a compact visual form. Notice the incredible symmetry and simplicity of the definitions.
Table 2: Salvation Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject: Salvation</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific Matters</strong></td>
<td>Exclusivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Religion Provides a Means</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religions Provide a Means</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followers of My Religion Can Obtain</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followers of Other Religions Can Obtain</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3 Responses about Truth Claims

Now let’s move on to the more important, and prominent subject of the Threefold Model, responses about truth claims. As with responses about salvation, I first need to clarify exactly what it is we are talking about here. It should be apparent that we are talking about various religions being correct in their truth claims. But what kind of truth claims? Since the purpose of the Threefold Model is to deal with religious diversity, it wouldn’t be very interesting or even make sense to discuss truth claims from the various religions which are in agreement with each other. How could one even be an exclusivist with regards to agreeing truth claims? And how easy and uninteresting would it be to be a pluralist about agreed truth claims? So obviously we are not talking about agreed truth claims.

Another possibility is if one religion makes truth claims that are ignored or forgotten by another religion. Let’s call these unresponded truth claims. There is no obvious problem here as the two religions are not in disagreement with each other. Once again, it would be easy to be a pluralist for this case as there is no dissent occurring. You could probably be some type of exclusivist here, but why would you even want to, when there is no obvious opposition to your claims occurring?
So, these types of truth claims are of little interest. The only type that should really concern us are those that are incompatible\(^{18}\) to each other. This is the topic the responses should focus on. Once again, where no misinterpretation will occur, I will abbreviate the topic to “responses about truth claims”. But, to be clear, the topic being analysed here is responses about various religions being correct in their incompatible truth claims.

I will now begin by providing McKim’s (2012) definitions.

**Exclusivism**

ET(1) The claims of our tradition are true, or most of them are true, and overall we do best in terms of truth; other traditions are correct when they accept our true claims; and they are mistaken when they reject our true claims; and their claims are generally mistaken (p. 30-31).

**Inclusivism**

IT(1) Others do fairly well overall in terms of truth, and we are only somewhat better off than they are in this regard, and

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\(^{18}\) I am tempted to use the word “contradictory” here, but this is not technically correct. A contradiction is a pair of claims in the \([p/-p]\) form. So one, and only one, of the claims must be true. An example is [Jesus is a deity/Jesus is not a deity]. Many religious claims are not in the \([p/-p]\) form but imply claims that are. For example, the claims, upon death [the soul goes to heaven/the soul gets reincarnated] are not in the \([p/-p]\) form and do not appear to be contradictions. But if the claim [the soul gets reincarnated] implies the claim [the soul does not go to heaven] then there is a contradiction. However, some religious claims don’t even imply contradictions. For example, the set of claims [Monotheism is true/Polytheism is true] are not in any way contradictory. They are only incompatible. Both cannot be true, but both could be false; there could be no gods. Even though these claims are not contradictory they should still concern one just the same, because both views can’t be correct. Therefore the word incompatible should always be used in this situation. Note that everything that is contradictory must also be incompatible, so we are not missing any possibilities by replacing the word “contradictory” with “incompatible”.

47
IT₃(1) Others may be right about beliefs that we do not hold, and

IT₃(1) We are open to learning from others (p. 36-7).

Pluralism

PT(1) Our religion does extremely well in terms of truth; other traditions do equally well, and no tradition does better than we do (p. 103).

Here are McKim’s definitions about truth claims in a table format.

**Table 3: McKim’s Truth Claims Definitions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject: Truth Claims</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific Matters</td>
<td>Exclusivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Truth of My Religion’s Claims</td>
<td>All True or Mostly True</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Truth of Other Religion’s Claims</td>
<td>Generally Mistaken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative Truth of My Religion’s Claims</td>
<td>Best</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incompatible Truth Claims – Which Religion Correct</td>
<td>Usually Better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others Correctness of Unresponded Beliefs</td>
<td>May be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to Learning from Others</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at this table we can see that it is complicated and lacking in symmetry. There appears to be an abundance of surplus information with three orphaned matters. Inconsistent terminology is used in the first matter, and the second matter alone distinguishes the three responses, meaning all other information is unnecessary.
2.3.1 Exclusivism about Truth Claims

Just as was done with the definitions regarding salvation, these definitions regarding truth claims will be individually analysed. McKim’s exclusivist definition, is a long and complicated one comprising five different elements.

\[ ET(1) \] The claims of our tradition are true, or most of them are true, and overall we do best in terms of truth; other traditions are correct when they accept our true claims; and they are mistaken when they reject our true claims; and their claims are generally mistaken.

The first thing that should be noticed about this definition is that McKim doesn’t limit the matter under discussion to just incompatible truth claims as I do. His third clause, “other traditions are correct when they accept our true claims”, involves the case where both religions make the same claim. So McKim has chosen to focus on a wider set of truth claim related matters, and then let the definitions sort out all the details. I don’t agree with this policy. As I said above I believe it is rather meaningless to talk about anything other than incompatible truth claims. At the very least, talking about multiple types of truth claims makes for greater ambiguity in the matters being discussed as well as longer definitions. But for now, let’s continue to analyse McKim’s definitions.

The first clause, “The claims of our tradition are true, or most of them are true” seems in order and allows for exclusivists to still be fallibilists. The second clause, “overall we do best in terms of truth” was added, according to McKim, to eliminate the possibility that some highly inferior religion could make a huge number of claims, but even though they get most of these claims wrong, they still, by sheer numbers, get more claims right than us (p. 28). This seems like a very trivial possibility. But there are less trivial possibilities which could undermine this definition if it doesn’t contain a superiority clause.
Consider a case where my religion is mostly correct about its claims, but occasionally gets some of them wrong, and the other religion has the opposite property. Also, the other religion mostly makes unresponded claims which don’t contradict my religion and these comprise their generally incorrect claims. However on those few claims where the two religions contradict each other, the other religion fares a lot better than mine. Thus, even though most of their claims are incorrect, they would have a case for being superior because whenever the two religions disagree, they are usually correct. This can’t possibly be exclusivism, so a superiority clause is necessary to prevent this scenario.

It is interesting to note that if the matter under discussion is various religions being correct in their incompatible truth claims, as I would like, then it is impossible for either of these two problem cases to ever occur. If we are only considering incompatible truth claims, and my religion is mostly right, then the other religion has to be mostly wrong. So it would be impossible, as in the first scenario, for them to have more correct than my religion does. In the second scenario there would be no smaller category where my “mostly right” claim might not apply. There would only be one category consisting of incompatible truth claims. So once again it would be impossible for the other religion to do better than my religion. Thus, confining the topic to one specific matter eliminates these sorts of problems and then no superiority clause is necessary. However, using McKim’s broader focus on multiple truth claim matters raises these types of problems which often require additional definitional clauses to eliminate.

The third and fourth clauses, “other traditions are correct when they accept our true claims; and they are mistaken when they reject our true claims” are tautologies and so add nothing to the definition. Because both clauses stipulate that our claims are true, then of course, if you agree with something that is true, you are correct. And if you disagree with something that is true, then you are mistaken.19 The third clause will be

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19 You can see (p. 24-25) why McKim added these two clauses. He initially had other religions being correct when they accept my religion’s claims and mistaken when they reject my religion’s claims. But
eliminated, but the idea behind the fourth clause has great value and is in fact fundamental to the concept of exclusivism. Removing the word “true” eliminates the tautology and leaves us with the notion that whenever there is a disagreement, it’s my religion that is correct and the other religion that is mistaken.

Lastly, the fifth clause, “their claims are generally mistaken” is another unnecessary addition to the definition. McKim describes two reasons for including it. First, he claims it is necessary to eliminate the possibility of “thoroughgoing pluralism” which is the view that all religions are right about everything (p. 26). McKim says that such a thoroughgoing pluralist would believe “that other traditions are mistaken when they reject his claims” (p. 27) thus making him appear to be an exclusivist. Since the most pluralistic of all pluralists can’t possibly be an exclusivist, this scenario needs to be eliminated. The way McKim chooses to eliminate it is to add this fifth clause to the definition of exclusivism saying that the claims of other religions are usually wrong. Since this contradicts the very definition of a thoroughgoing pluralist it would then be impossible to consider them exclusivists.

However this scenario can never exist and so it’s not something that needs to be eliminated. It is impossible for a thoroughgoing pluralist to have such a belief since they hold the view that all religions are correct about everything. If they then came to the belief that some religion was mistaken about something they wouldn’t be thoroughgoing pluralists anymore. McKim seems to acknowledge this in a footnote when he says, “It does not require great investigation to see that thoroughgoing pluralism is self-contradictory”, and “the reasons for ... [adding this clause] ... are not dependent on thoroughgoing pluralism being a coherent position” (p. 34). One is left

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then, due to the introduction of fallibilism in the first clause, he worried about the case where my religion’s claims were incorrect, and so changed the wording to my religion’s true claims, perhaps not realising that this created a tautology.

20 This is the fourth clause in McKim’s definition.
wondering why he bothered raising thoroughgoing pluralism at all. Nevertheless we will have to look to other reasons for including this last clause.

McKim’s second reason is that, without this clause, it is possible for the claims of the other religion to be mostly true, entirely true, or even have more truths than my religion. First of all, the final worry, about having more truths than my religion, is not applicable because the second clause, about superiority, removes this possibility.\(^{21}\) The second worry, that the claims of the other religion are entirely true, is also adequately dealt with by the superiority clause. Because of this clause, my religion must also have 100% of its truth claims correct and must have more total correct claims than the other religion\(^{22}\), so it still has a claim of superiority. But, if you were worried this wasn’t enough superiority, consider the fact that if both religions are entirely correct and never disagree with each other on a single point, then they are actually the same religion. So you don’t need to be an exclusivist in relation to them. Finally, the first worry about the claims of the other religion being mostly true shouldn’t be a concern. It was already stated that my religion is superior. So why is it necessary to have a negative view about how successful the other religion’s truth claims are?

The only possible reason for doing this is that McKim has constructed his typological definitions in such a way that this negative view on other religion’s truth claims is what distinguishes exclusivism from inclusivism. You can see in Table 3 that the only factor that separates the three responses is the absolute truth of the other religion’s claims. Under his definitions if you didn’t think the other religion’s truth claims were generally mistaken you would have to be an inclusivist or pluralist. Thus the exclusivist definition has to include this clause.

\(^{21}\) McKim actually listed these concerns before he added the superiority clause. If he had constructed the clauses in his definitions in a different order he likely would have realised this concern was no longer valid.

\(^{22}\) Or some other attribute which would allow it to claim overall superiority.
But this just seems wrong. The Abrahamic religions are well known as being the most exclusivist of all religions. Yet the three of them, belonging to the same family of religions, have a high degree of agreement. It would be absurd for any one of these religions to say that most of the claims of the others are mistaken, because most of the claims are in fact the same. So under this set of definitions none of these religions could be exclusivist, which is in contradiction to how they are generally viewed. Looked at more generally, for any religion, if there exists another religion with more than 50% of their claims in agreement, then it is impossible for that religion to be exclusivist. This is at odds with how exclusivism is understood. Therefore it seems incorrect to use the absolute truth of other religion’s claims as a typological dividing line. Having removed this reason, there is no need for the fifth clause.

Once again, if the definitions were confined to the matter of incompatible truth claims only, then this extra fifth claim would never have even been contemplated. In such a case if my religion is mostly right then the other religion has to be mostly wrong. It is impossible for them to mostly right, all right, or more right than my religion. Such worries don’t apply.

We have now finished analysing the definitions for exclusivism about truth claims. It was very noticeable during this exercise that definitions regarding all truth claims were struggling under the complexities of having to deal with too many different situations. This problem is only going to get worse as we move to discuss inclusivism and pluralism which are far more ambiguous. Therefore, even though I will continue to analyse McKim’s definitions, I will only derive new definitions for the more specific matter of incompatible religious truth claims.

In the analysis just completed I concluded that the third, and fifth clauses are not required, and the second clause is unnecessary in the case of incompatible truth claims. The fourth clause was amended. Applying all these changes gives us:
ET(2) The claims of our tradition are true, or most of them are true; other traditions are mistaken when they reject our claims.

The first change to this definition will be to introduce an initial phrase focusing it solely on *incompatible* truth claims, as mentioned above. Since we are only considering incompatible claims, all of the other religion’s claims are rejections of our claims, so we can delete this specification at the end of the second clause.

ET(3) Given a set of incompatible truth claims, the claims of our tradition are true, or most of them are true; the claims of the other tradition are mistaken.

Replacing “our” with “my” and “tradition” with “religion” as was done in the salvation definitions above; changing “mistaken” with “false” to provide better symmetry across the definition; substituting “from” for “of” to provide better clarity; and eliminating wordiness by using “claims” once instead of three times, yields:

ET(4) Given a set of incompatible truth claims, those from my religion are true, or most of them are true and those from the other religion are false.

Finally, there is a slight problem with this definition because it is possible that not all my religion’s claims are true, yet all of the other religion’s claims are false. This misses the potential for the other’s claim to be true where my claim is false. To correct this problem and gain the added benefit of greatly simplifying the definition, I want to say *all* the claims of my religion are true. However this would go too far as it would rule out fallibilism. Religions make thousands of claims, so to believe that absolutely none of them are incorrect is a very strong conviction that even few exclusivists would agree with. I think an acceptable alternative is to only consider important truth claims, being those claims that are so critical to the religion, they help to define its very essence. These are claims that if not held, would raise serious questions as to one’s membership of that religion. Most exclusivists would accept that such claims cannot be
compromised, and are necessarily true for adherents of that religion.\textsuperscript{23} Inserting this into the definition gives us:

$$\text{ET}_1(F) \text{ Given a set of important incompatible truth claims, those from my religion are true and those from the other religion are false.}$$

Notice that I have added a subscript to this final statement to indicate that it is the first claim in the definition. The reason is that, as shall be shown below, inclusivism about truth claims will adopt the exact same first claim. Therefore a second claim is necessary to differentiate exclusivism from inclusivism.

At this point we face a crucial decision, what new property should be used to distinguish responses in the threefold typology regarding truth claims? Recall that McKim chose the absolute degree of truth in the other religion’s claims and I was critical of that choice because it didn’t separate the three responses in ways that are consistent with how they are understood. But there are two more reasons for why this wasn’t the best choice for a categorisation property. First, the degree of truth is a continuous function. This makes it very difficult to separate the data into response categories as there is no clear place to divide it. You have to choose some sort of arbitrary point of separation like fairly well/extremely well. Even if you agreed with these separation points they are so ambiguous they make it challenging to decide which category to allocate the data to. Where does fairly well end and extremely well begin? You could eliminate this problem by selecting quantitative values like 90% correct. But then whatever you gain in precision you lose in justification. Why should 90% correct be extremely well and not 89%? What you really want to use is a function

\textsuperscript{23} Note that the typology categorises the responses of individuals. Religions themselves cannot respond, only individuals within those religions. And within each religion there will be individuals responding in each of the three different ways the typology identifies. Therefore it is not necessary to agree upon exactly which claims constitute the set of important claims. Each individual will have their own set in mind and will be categorised accordingly.
which has a binary outcome so it is clear where to split the response categories and which category to allocate the data to.

A second reason not to use a continuous function is that ideally we would like the responses about truth claims to be consistent with the responses about salvation. This is especially the case since these two often get conflated together, so it would be best if their categorisation schemes were nearly identical. Since salvation was categorised by a pair of binary functions (means, beneficiaries) our goal should be to find a similar binary pair for truth claims. Fortunately such an ideal pair exists and has already been the topic of our discussions.

The first statement in the exclusivism about truth claims definition, ET₁(F), told us how to handle incompatible truth claims in other religions. The only two remaining truth claim categories are agreed truth claims and unresponded truth claims. There isn’t much to be said about agreed truth claims between two religions. Obviously if both religions agree we would view them as both being correct. But unresponded truth claims are more complicated. How does my religion handle unresponded truth claims of another religion? The answer to this question is not only interesting in its own right, but serves as the perfect binary property to differentiate between the response categories.

Basically, exclusivism holds that other religions have no important unresponded truth claims and inclusivism holds that they do. The exclusivist believes that my religion already expresses all of the known important religious truth claims and there is nothing important that can be learned from other religions. Putting this into a definitional statement we have:

\[ \text{ET}_1(F) \text{ My religion contains all known important religious truths. Other religions contain only important religious truths already expressed in my religion. My religion has nothing important to learn from other religions.} \]
The second and third sentences in this statement aren’t, strictly speaking, required as they are simply implications of the first sentence. However, I think it helps to flesh out the full intent of this statement include these last two sentences. A fourth sentence stating that the other religion has a lot to learn from my religion could potentially be added. But since the definition focuses on how a follower of my religion responds to other religions, the possibilities for improvement in the other religion are of lessor importance. Thus I won’t burden the definition with this extra implication.

2.3.2 Inclusivism about Truth Claims

Next we look at the inclusivist definition, beginning with the first claim.

IT:1(1) Others do fairly well overall in terms of truth, and we are only somewhat better off than they are in this regard.

The point to note about this claim is that the second clause, “we are only somewhat better off” weakens my religion far too much to be considered inclusivism. The idea behind inclusivism is not to diminish my religion in any way, but rather to allow other religions into its fold. Inclusivists walk hand in hand with exclusivists in believing that, where religious claims conflict, they are the ones who are correct. So they are a lot more than just “somewhat better off”. The difference is that inclusivism recognises that other religions contain some truth and some value. So this second clause needs to be eliminated.

The first clause is even more problematic. It should be evident that this clause cannot possibly apply to incompatible truth claims. The sum of correct incompatible truth claims has to equal 100% or less. Assuming “fairly well” means more than 50% of

---

24 For contradictory claims it must equal 100%, but for incompatible claims it is possible they are both false and so it could be less than 100%.
their claims are correct, then it is impossible for my religion to do better than this because the total would be more than 100%.

But if it is applied to all truth claims, as McKim intends, then it must be saying something about the other two types of truth claims; agreed claims and unresponded claims. So IT₁(1) could mean that the two religions have many truth claims in common. Yet this is not only uninteresting, it does absolutely nothing to help solve the problem of religious diversity. Also, it doesn’t really capture the idea behind inclusivism which is to begin as an exclusivist, but then seek to recognise some value in the other religion. If the only positive thing that can be said about another religion is the fact that some of their claims duplicate those of my religion, this isn’t conceding much value. Finally, while it is quite possible, perhaps even likely, that other religions which you are an inclusivist about have many claims in common, this isn’t what defines inclusivism. One can still be an inclusivist about another religion even if the two religions have few claims in common. Therefore, highlighting the level of agreed claims between my religion and others can’t be the intent behind this first claim.

So IT₁(1) must be asserting that the other religion makes many true unresponded claims. And to say that the other religion does “fairly well” in terms of overall truth, these claims must be about some reasonably important issues. If, for example, a religion made thousands of claims going into meticulous detail about how one should dress, they would most likely, even if they were true, simply be attributed to cultural or historical idiosyncrasies of that religion and thus hold little relevance to my religion. This would not cause me to rank the other religion highly in terms of overall truth. Nor would the existence of all these claims be significant enough to earn a place in the definition of inclusivism as it would do nothing to distinguish it from exclusivism. An exclusivist would be unlikely to deny the existence of such insignificant true claims.

To be worthy of a mention in the definition of inclusivism the other religion must contain a substantial number of unresponded claims about important matters.
However this idea itself is questionable. While it is easy to conceive that other religions do possess some true important unresponded claims, it is difficult to believe that they possess large numbers of them. The reason is that there are unlikely to be many important matters left undiscussed in most religions. Remember the definition of inclusivism describes a response from my religion’s point of view. So the matters must be important to my religion. Yet if they really were important they likely would have already been discussed by my religion.

For sure, there are many important claims that another religion might make which are not directly responded to by my religion. But in my religion’s body of doctrine there is usually some sort of implied response. For example, the Hindu religion talks about reincarnation. There is no direct mention of this in Christian doctrine, with the possible exception of some Judgement Day eschatological event which is nothing like the Hindu concept. So, you could say that this is an unresponded claim. However, there is enough said in Christian doctrine about what happens to Christians upon death that you could implicitly rule out the possibility of reincarnation. Thus, this is an example of an incompatible truth claim rather than an unresponded truth claim. Here the incompatibility arises from implications of other claims.

Similarly, if some religion makes a claim about one’s obligation to pray to God; for example Islam mandates performing ritual prayers five times per day. This is clearly a very important claim, being one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Christianity says nothing about daily prayer requirements, so you could argue that this is an unresponded claim. However, it would be more correct to argue that since Christianity says nothing about obligatory prayer, and most Christians do not engage in obligatory prayer, then they reject this claim. So it is actually another example of an incompatible claim rather than an unresponded claim. And here the incompatibility arises from the implications of adherent’s actions.
In short, most claims that are perceived to be unresponded are more likely to actually be incompatible. Therefore, it strains the imagination to think that another religion could make so many important true unresponded claims that they would overwhelm all of the incorrect incompatible claims made, to such a degree that they would be considered as doing “fairly well” overall in terms of truth. Thus, not even this third prospect for what IT1(1) means can help us. So IT1(1) needs to be dropped from the inclusivism definition.

However, there is one concept within IT1(1) that I believe is essential to inclusivism, and that is the idea that the other religion contains at least some true important unresponded claims. There should be little doubt that at least some important unresponded claims exist between religions. For example, there is nothing in Christian doctrine resembling the Hindu concept of karma. If you divorce karma from reincarnation (mentioned above as being a concept that most Christians would reject) then you likely have an unresponded claim. A weak version of karma would potentially be quite acceptable to most Christians, and could even be thought of as sort of the ledger in which God keeps track of people’s good and bad deeds.

Another example would be the Buddhist claim of no-self. It seems certain that most Christians would reject this idea in its strong form. But a weaker form might comprise the claim that a mental abandonment of the ego would be extremely conducive to helping one perceive those higher levels of reality which most religions seek to know. This would not only have no parallels in Christianity, but likely be important, useful, and acceptable to most Christians.

A couple of more examples that would almost certainly be considered unresponded claims would be if one religion makes predictions about the future, or adds details to

25 As we shall soon see, inclusivists side with exclusivists in holding that the other religion is mistaken in all important incompatible truth claims.
an area of doctrine that the two religions have in common.26 The only question with these examples is whether they would rank as important. Anyway, even if none of these particular examples convince you, you should agree that given their potential for modification and sheer variety it is highly probable that at least a few true important unresponded claims occur.

So IT₁(1) could be modified to convey just this idea. But as it happens this is unnecessary because the second statement in McKim’s inclusivism definition expresses exactly this idea.

\[
\text{IT}_2(1) \text{ Others may be right about beliefs that we do not hold.}
\]

It turns out that the underlying idea here is completely the opposite of the one expressed in the second exclusivism claim. This is a very fortunate occurrence because it gives us a perfect point of differentiation between exclusivism and inclusivism. But we need to massage the wording a bit to get it perfectly in alignment with the exclusivist claim.

If we replace “Others” by “Other religions” to add precision. Similarly, rather than talking about “beliefs” we are discussing “religious claims”. And if those claims were correct they could be called truths, and a religion is not “right about” truths but rather “contain” them. The truths of interest are the “important” ones. So “may be right about beliefs” will be changed to “may contain important religious truths”. Finally, the reason “we do not hold” these beliefs is that they are “not expressed in my religion”. Implementing all these changes give us a near word for word opposite of the second clause of the second exclusivism claim:

\[
\text{IT}_2(2) \text{ Other religions may contain important religious truths not expressed in my religion.}
\]

---

26 For instance, if both religions are in agreement that a place called heaven exists, one might provide a lot more colour on what this place is like or how one might get there.
The first clause in that exclusivism claim is much more significant because it discusses what important religious truths my religion contains. The second clause is merely an implication of this first clause. A similar logic should apply here and so I’ll insert the same clause, stated in terms of my religion, as the first clause of this inclusivism statement.

IT\textsubscript{3}(3) My religion does not contain all known important religious truths. Other religions may contain important religious truths not expressed in my religion.

You can see here that the second clause, derived from McKim’s IT\textsubscript{3}(1) statement is actually too weak. If my religion does not contain all of these truths, then other religions not only may contain some, they must contain some. So the word “may” needs to be dropped from this statement. In addition, the opposing exclusivist statement ET\textsubscript{3}(F) says other religions contain “only” truths already expressed. To properly contrast this we need to say something more than just “only”. We could say “some” truths, but that makes the other religions sound lacking. So we will say, “some, and perhaps many” to make it clear that these other religions could possibly even be superior in this regard. Making these changes gives us:

IT\textsubscript{3}(4) My religion does not contain all known important religious truths. Other religions contain some, and perhaps many important religious truths not expressed in my religion.

The exclusivism statement also contained a third clause which, along with the second, helped to fully explain the intent behind the exclusivism response. This inclusivism statement would equally benefit from such an addition. But once again, we don’t need to look too far for such a clause because McKim already thought of this idea and even made it his third inclusivism statement:

IT\textsubscript{3}(1) We are open to learning from others.
This third inclusivist claim follows directly from the second, because if another religion contains important religious truths that we don’t have, there is obviously something to be learned from them. Since it is only an implication it doesn’t seem to merit being a standalone statement in the inclusivism definition and would more appropriately be placed as an add-on to the second statement.

Also McKim states this idea in terms of an attitude, but I think the more crucial point is that there is something to be learned from other religions. Whether we choose to be open to that learning is of less relevance. One would still be an inclusivist if they agreed there was valuable material to be learned, but for whatever reason, they personally weren’t willing to do it. So, rewording IT3(1) as a statement about my religion, rather than a personal attitude, and appending this to IT2(4) yields:

\[
\text{IT2(F)} \quad \text{My religion does not contain all known important religious truths. Other religions contain some, and perhaps many important religious truths not expressed in my religion. My religion has something important to learn from other religions.}
\]

One more thing remains to be done with the inclusivism definition. The above statement acts as our differentiator with exclusivism, but pluralism would agree with this, so we need an additional statement to underscore inclusivism’s differences with pluralism. And such a statement is already at hand. Recollect our earlier discussion about how exclusivism and inclusivism are side-by-side in their agreement that when important conflicting religious claims arise, the truth always rests in their camp. This is the antithesis of pluralism. Furthermore, exclusivism even uses this claim as the first statement in its definition. So ET1(F) can be adopted without change here. Since I already disposed of the first inclusivism statement, the subscript can even remain unchanged.

\[
\text{IT1(F)} \quad \text{Given a set of important incompatible truth claims, those from my religion are true and those from the other religion are false.}
\]
Notice that once again, as with salvation, we had to mix matters (incompatible truth claims and unresponded truth claims) to come up with a proper definition for inclusivism about truth claims. But this is simply the way inclusivism works. The good point is that this feature of inclusivism is now well understood, which allows us to create rigorous, highly useful definitions.

2.3.3 Pluralism about Truth Claims

Now it is time to move on to the final definition, pluralism about truth claims. We begin with McKim’s definition:

   PT(1) Our religion does extremely well in terms of truth; other traditions do equally well, and no tradition does better than we do.

The initial thing we notice about this claim is that it is almost exactly the same as the third pluralism about salvation claim except that salvation is replaced with truth. I spent many pages on that claim discussing the changes that were required and many of the same thoughts apply to pluralism about truth claims.

The purpose of the first clause was to remove the possibility that all the religions do horribly in regards to some matter. I argued that this is not a concern in the place of salvation because some salvations are better than no salvations, but I do think this is a potential worry for truth claims. However I don’t accept that my religion needs to do “extremely well” to eliminate this problem; only “reasonable”. So a modified version of this clause could be retained.

Next, I argued that the second clause about equality is misplaced and that pluralism does not in any way entail the equality of religions. Finally, I demonstrated that the third, non-inferiority clause, was not required, did no work in the definition, and sounds quite exclusivist.
Applying these changes, as well as making some of the word replacements discussed in earlier definitions gives us:

PT(2) My religion does reasonable in terms of truth, and so do some, and perhaps many, other religions.

It would be nice to end here, but we are limiting our definitions to only apply to incompatible truth claims rather than all truth claims as McKim has done. Doing so makes this statement impossible. As we saw above in the inclusivism section, everyone can’t do well in terms of incompatible truth claims. So this statement needs to be adapted to something that is both possible and pluralistic. I think the idea that this statement is trying to convey is that no religion has a monopoly on the truth. Unlike exclusivism and inclusivism, pluralism allows that other religions could be correct, even in the case of important incompatible truth claims. Therefore we need to say something along these lines.

We don’t want to go so far as saying that the religions are equal or even equally likely in terms of truth. In the salvation section I discussed at length why religions should not be thought of as equal, but equally likely is a bit more nuanced. This would not be an expression of equality, but rather an expression of complete uncertainty. It is not saying that we have measured all the religions and found them equally likely to be true, but only that they are equally likely because we have absolutely no idea which one is correct. Certainly some religions are more correct than others, and one religion is likely more correct than all the rest. But we don’t have a clue which one.

This would make for an appealing addition to the definition of pluralism, but to add such a claim would be to go too far. It would rule out weaker forms of pluralism such as the view that my religion is usually correct. Under my definitions this position would have no place to reside as it couldn’t be a version of inclusivism which states my religion is always correct in conflicting claims. So it has to be counted under the pluralism category.
The inclusivism definition could be revised so as to not have this constraint. However I still think this position better belongs in the pluralism camp than the inclusivism one. Inclusivism should align with exclusivism on the question of incompatible truth claims, just as it does with exclusivism on the existence of a means to salvation. Remember the idea behind inclusivism is “exclusivism light”. A final reason is that we concluded in the section on salvation that pluralists should be allowed to make superiority claims. We should remain consistent with that decision here in the section on truths. So, as with salvation, pluralism about truth claims will say nothing about equality, not even equally likely. But we can say that there is enough uncertainty regarding the truth that any religion counted within a pluralist’s domain is capable of being correct, given an important incompatible truth claim.

Putting these ideas into a definition would give us something like this:

\[
\text{PT}(3) \text{ Given a set of important incompatible truth claims, those from my religion might be true and those from the other religion might}^{27} \text{ be true.}
\]

This statement is exactly the same as IT₁(F) except that “are true” and “are false” have been changed to “might be true” \(^\text{28}\), highlighting pluralism’s differences with inclusivism/exclusivism. So while definitions of the later definitively assert that the important incompatible claims of my religion are true, pluralism says no, they might not be true, injecting a huge dose of uncertainty into the equation, as is desired.

---

\(27\) It is tempting to use the word “may” here. But because “may” is a modal verb it can become somewhat ambiguous. One is not sure if we are using the word in an epistemic sense relating to logical possibility, as in “might”, or a deontic sense relating to permission, as in “allowed”. Also “may” is generally considered to confer some higher level of probability so one might mistake the definition for meaning that both claims are true at the same time, a situation sometimes posited in certain forms of pluralism. In contrast “might” is much clearer, possessing no deontic meaning and generally being regarded as somewhere around a 50% chance, if it is thought to indicate probability at all.

\(28\) If you are bothered by the fact that the “are false” phrase required two changes be made to it (“are” \(-\rightarrow\) “may be” and “false” \(-\rightarrow\) “true”) instead of just one for the “are true” phrase, consider that in sets with binary outcomes like [true/false] the phrase “are false” can be stated as “are not true”. Thus IT₁(F) contains the phrases “are true” and “are not true”, and both these received a single change to “might be true”.

66
PT(3) can be written even more simply as:

\[ \text{PT}_1(F) \text{ Given a set of important incompatible truth claims, those from either religion might be true.} \]

One point I should make here is that the pluralist is not going through life with this negative attitude about their religion, thinking that they might not even get 50% of their claims correct, nor are they beset with uncertainty. This statement only applies to their important incompatible claims. Many religions will have a large number of agreed truth claims and all religions will have a large number of unresponded claims, at least some of them being quite important. They should approach the situation in a positive manner. They have a great deal of respect for other religions and are aware of the existence of many important incompatible truth claims. So they simply accept the obvious fact that for these other religions to enjoy credibility it is necessary for their own religion to be incorrect a fair amount of the time. This is an idea an exclusivist would never canvas.

Notice above that I added a subscript to this statement, and once again that is because a second statement is required for this definition. \( \text{PT}_1(F) \) did the job of discriminating pluralism from the other responses, however we were required to add a second matter, being unresponded claims, into the inclusivism definition to distinguish it from exclusivism. Inclusivism and pluralism agree on unresponded claims, so we can just use the inclusivism statement in its entirety.

\[ \text{PT}_2(F) \text{ My religion does not contain all known important religious truths. Other religions contain some, and perhaps many important religious truths not expressed in my religion. My religion has something important to learn from other religions.} \]
2.3.4 Truth Claim Definitions for the Threefold Model

As I did when ending the section on salvation I will summarise this section by putting all the new definitions together so you can see the entire typological structure regarding truth claims.

Responses about Truth Claims

Exclusivism

1) Given a set of important incompatible truth claims, those from my religion are true and those from the other religion are false.

2) My religion contains all known important religious truths. Other religions contain only important religious truths already expressed in my religion. My religion has nothing important to learn from other religions.

Inclusivism

1) Given a set of important incompatible truth claims, those from my religion are true and those from the other religion are false.

2) My religion does not contain all known important religious truths. Other religions contain some, and perhaps many important religious truths not expressed in my religion. My religion has something important to learn from other religions.

Pluralism

1) Given a set of important incompatible truth claims, those from either religion might be true.

2) My religion does not contain all known important religious truths. Other religions contain some, and perhaps many important religious truths not expressed in my religion. My religion has something important to learn from other religions.
Table 4 below shows the definitions in a compact visual form. Once again, notice the incredible symmetry, simplicity and clarity of the definitions.

**Table 4: Truth Claim Definitions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject: Truth Claims</th>
<th>Exclusivism</th>
<th>Inclusivism</th>
<th>Pluralism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific Matters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important Incompatible Truth Claims – My Religion Must be Correct</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Religion Contains all Known Important Religious Truths</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What makes these new definitions strikingly beautiful, in the sense that they possess so many highly desirable properties, is that we’ve been able to deconstruct the Threefold Model and figure out how it really operates. You have may have noticed by now that the Threefold Model consists of a pair of binary questions. Any binary question has two possible answers. Letting 1=yes and 0=no we have 1 and 0 as potential solutions. So a pair of binary questions has four possible outcomes (11 10 01 00). The nuance with the Threefold Model is that due to the nature of the questions, one of these possible outcomes can’t exist. Looking at Table 4 above we see that there is no 01 (No/Yes) outcome for any response. This would equate to saying other religions are correct about important incompatible truth claims but my religion knows all of the important religious truths. Impossible!

Similarly for salvation, in Table 2 a 10 (Yes/No) outcome doesn’t exist. This would equate to other religions providing a means to salvation, but followers of other religions cannot obtain salvation. We talked about this case earlier. A religion can’t be said to have a means if none of its adherents are ever able to access it. Another impossible outcome.
So the structure of the two questions making up the binary pair must be related to each other in such a way that they are able to rule out one outcome. This means that there are only ever three possible results and these comprise the responses of the Threefold Model. Once this is known, any pair of binary questions that implicitly rule out one option can be described using the Threefold Model structure.29

2.4 Race’s Original Concept

Now that we understand the concept of using pairs of binary matters so well, it is interesting to go back and look at Race’s original concept of the Threefold Model. From this perspective it can be easily understood as just another pair of binary matters, namely, followers of various religions obtaining salvation, and my religion being correct in incompatible truth claims. Here is what the claim table looks like.

Table 5: Original Threefold Model Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject: Salvation &amp; Truth Claims</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific Matters20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followers of Other Religions can Obtain Salvation</td>
<td>Exclusivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incompatible Truth Claims – My Religion Must be Correct</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is fascinating to note that Race could also have defined his Threefold Model in a different fashion, notably using the other two matters that I have employed in the

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29 Note that, as in the case of salvation, additional questions can be incorporated into the definitions as long as all responses have the same answer. This creates no new possible outcomes.

30 Technically an additional matter (Followers of My Religion can Obtain Salvation) should be added as was done in Table 2. It does nothing to differentiate the responses but is necessary to specify what happens to the followers of my religion. The answer to this could be, and often is, included in the claim about the followers of other religions, with a statement like, only followers of my religion can obtain salvation. But this complicates the discussion by mixing matters, combining two pieces of information into one statement.
definitions of Salvation and Truth Claims. This is what that claim table would look like.

**Table 6: Original Threefold Model Alternative Definitions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject: Salvation &amp; Truth Claims</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific Matters</strong>&lt;sup&gt;31&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Exclusivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religions Provide a Means to Salvation</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Religion Contains all Known Important Religious Truths</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These two tables highlight the many problems with the traditional version of the Threefold Model. The first problem is that there are two tables. The fact that two, and perhaps more, completely different pairs of binary claims can be used to represent the model tells us that it is highly ambiguous. Ideally there would be only one pair of claims for any topic. The second is that the two different matters being mixed are about such completely different, unrelated subjects that they don’t offer any obvious guidance on how to select matters. It appears as if you could put just about any two matters into the model. And given the independence of the two matters, what do you even call the topic? It is not about just truth claims and it is not just salvation. It is a bit of each. And given Table 5 & 6 both have the same subjects, the topic is a bit of each of two very specific matters regarding truth claims and salvation. So the only apparent way to even describe the topic is to spell out, in full, the two precise matters being discussed. Contrast this with the new definitions I’ve derived above where one knows that every specific matter in the model deals with one subject, and thus there are likely only a couple of important specific matters which could even be included in the model.

---

<sup>31</sup> The same applies here, with the additional statement being (My Religion Provides a Means to Salvation).
Finally, the gravest problem is that neither of these two tables follows the rule I just advised above, requiring the pair of claims to rule out one possible outcome. The reason is that the two matters involved are so different that they do nothing to eliminate logical possibilities for each other. You can see this in Table 5 where the 0/0 (No/No) outcome is missing, but it is definitely still possible. You could easily have a situation where the followers of other religions cannot obtain salvation but at the same time, my religion is not always correct. The other religions are correct at least some of the time, but this has nothing to do with salvation. Being correct in some important incompatible truth claims does nothing to ensure salvation.

Similarly in Table 6 there is no 1/1 (Yes/Yes) scenario, but such an outcome is still very possible. You need to believe that other religions have a means to salvation even though my religion contains all the known important religious truths. It is simple to imagine that the other religions accomplish their means following the truths already known by my religion, or perhaps God doles out salvations to all with good morals, regardless of the correctness of the claims they believe in. This is a very serious deficiency where the potential outcomes aren’t even exhausted by the model’s three responses. Using such a flawed model should never even be considered.

In short, the traditional Threefold Model is besieged with problems. It is complex, ill-conceived, cumbersome to use, error-prone32, and offers incomplete coverage of its subject matter. The new version of this model developed herein is vastly superior across multiple dimensions.

This concludes the chapter on the Threefold Model of Religious Responses. Now is a good time to go back through this discussion and have another look at McKim’s original definitions for salvation and truth claims, comparing them to the new ones constructed in this paper. McKim did an excellent job of creating a set of good definitions and pointing out many of the possible pitfalls surrounding any such

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32 Because in practice no one actually will spell out the full length specific topics.
definitions about these complex issues. But I think most will agree, these new definitions have a theoretical foundation as well as a clarity, symmetry, and coherency that is unsurpassed in the literature.
3. PLURALISTIC MODELS OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

In the last chapter I completed the task of producing meaningful definitions for two religious pluralisms; namely salvation and truth claims. We now know precisely what it means to be a pluralist about these two subjects. Next, it is time to consider models that incorporate these pluralisms. These will describe specifically how one can be such a pluralist.

But before we can begin, we need to be clear about exactly what we are modelling. What should be obvious from the previous chapter is that one can be a pluralist about many different subjects. This means that one could create pluralistic models about a whole range of subjects. Unfortunately, when most people use the term ‘pluralism’ they rarely specify exactly what subject they are a pluralist about. They think that this is just obvious or can correctly be assumed. But given the large number of meanings attributed to the word ‘pluralism’ this leads to great ambiguity. So, I should start by mentioning a few of the most common usages of the word ‘pluralism’ and make it clear which one of these I am modelling.

Pluralism is most often taken to simply mean religious diversity. As Archard (1996, p. 1) calls it, “the fact of difference”. Pluralism is the “the empirical reality of diverse religious systems in the world” (Demarest 1991, p. 135). So if you were a pluralist using this meaning, you would simply be a pluralist about the existence of many religions. This would be a trivial subject to model.

Another common usage of ‘pluralism’ is to mean religious tolerance. Using this meaning you would be a pluralist about religious adherents of all types being accepted and treated equally. I will briefly mention this type of pluralism below, but it is not this paper’s main area of focus.
A third frequent usage of ‘pluralism’ is to mean ecumenism. Using this meaning you would be a pluralist about engaging with other faiths. While important, I will not be discussing this type of pluralism at all.

The pluralism that I want to focus on here is the understanding of religious diversity. Tracy (1987, p. 2) nails the definition I am after when he states, “Plurality is a fact. Pluralism is one of the many possible evaluations of that fact.” So, I want to examine pluralistic models that explain religious diversity, or more precisely explain, in a pluralistic fashion, the abundance of incompatible truth claims that are present in the diverse array of religions.

So the goal of the type of pluralism I am concentrating on is to provide a response to the problem of religious diversity. There is only one type of pluralism that can do that, and that is pluralism about various religions being correct in their important incompatible truth claims. The very reason that the problem of religious diversity exists is that different religions make truth claims which are incompatible to each other. In this situation, the question that is demanding to be answered is, who is correct? Which one of these claims are true?33 The only type of pluralism that even attempts to answer these questions is one which deals with incompatible truth claims.

Many other pluralists agree with me on this point, that pluralism should focus on the topic of incompatible truth claims. Unfortunately, their understanding of this type of pluralism is that the various religions should be correct in all of their important incompatible truth claims. That is, for any given incompatible truth claim, both religions are correct and nobody is mistaken. Wouldn’t that be a wonderful world if this could be true? Then we could all be exclusivists and no one would ever contradict our view. But of course, this is impossible. Sadly many religions seem to have a phobia

33 Other questions, such as who obtains salvation, are also important. But they depend upon assumed truth claims like, my religion’s salvation is the only salvation, or these religions possess a means to salvation, to gain their importance. Because of this they are clearly secondary in nature.
to the idea that even some of their claims could potentially be incorrect, and this leads them to shy away from any meaningful form of pluralism.

When your pluralism has to show how two incompatible truth claims can both be true, it really becomes a rather intractable concept. So much so, that most pluralistic models have strayed away from the idea of truth claims and instead become pluralistic about nearly every religious property except truth claims. As we saw above, it seems religious pluralism itself has been redefined to mean, any view that looks at many other religions in a positive light. Because these models are so prevalent, and often get conflated with the most important type of pluralism, they will be examined. But, always keep in mind that when discussing the problem of religious diversity, pluralism about various religions being correct in their incompatible truth claims is the only form of pluralism that is really meaningful. And had other pluralists adopted a more liberal definition that doesn’t require you to get all of your incompatible truth claims correct, then this is the type of pluralism that they would likely be considering as well.

Instead, we have a rainbow of different forms of pluralism on offer, with only a couple even focused on the correct matter (truth claims), and those doing so only in highly distorted ways. Furthermore, it should be obvious that any relevant pluralistic model is going to have to conform to the definition of pluralism about important incompatible truth claims described in Chapter 2, yet only two of the many forms of pluralism can even claim to meet this most basic of requirements.\textsuperscript{34}

One final point should be made before I move on. The definition of pluralism, worked out in Chapter 2, encompassed two matters (correctness of incompatible truth claims, and possession of important religious truths). But in this chapter I am only going to be discussing the first of these matters. The reason is that if you are not involving

\textsuperscript{34} If it is a pluralism which deals with truth claims and it doesn’t conform to this definition, then it is likely incoherent in some manner.
inclusivism (this chapter is only about pluralism) then you don’t need the second matter. Its purpose was to separate inclusivism from exclusivism. The first matter about incompatible truth claims is all we need to distinguish pluralism from the other two responses.

With these points made, let’s now take a look at the various models of pluralism on offer. When beginning this exercise, the first thing that strikes one is that there are just so many different types of pluralistic models. To get a good handle on all these different models and understand how they relate to each other, some sort of classification system is required. Fortunately, there are several papers which have attempted to do this. The most comprehensive of these is Legenhausen’s (2009) paper, “On the Plurality of Religious Pluralisms”. Min (1997) covers many different types of pluralism and proposes a new one. Ruhmkorff (2013) and Tuggy (2017) also chip in their own lists of pluralistic models. However, there is much room for improvement in all these existing classification papers, so I will use these as a starting point and build from there.

As stated above, religious pluralism, in its broadest sense, is the view that there exists some positive attribute (the thing you are a pluralist about) which some group of religions (usually all religions or all the major religions) share. For the sake of brevity, from here on I will refer to ‘all religions’ when discussing pluralistic models. But that could easily be replaced by whatever subset of religions you think is appropriate.

Legenhausen (2009, p. 6) begins by claiming that all the different types of religious pluralisms can be divided into two major categories, being reductive and non-reductive pluralisms. He provides the following definitions for them:

Reductive pluralism - the position that what is good about religions is what is common to a plurality of them.

Non-reductive pluralism – the view that what is unique to a religion is what gives it value (Legenhausen 2009, p. 38).
The idea here is that pluralism can be reductive in the sense that it reduces what is good about religions to only those elements which are held in common.

This whole concept of reductive/non-reductive pluralism seems very confused. First, why should the idea that “what is unique to a religion is what gives it value”, be termed non-reductive? Doesn’t this concept just reduce religions to their unique attributes?

Second, the idea that pluralism attempts to make some value judgement (the “what is good about them”) about religions seems misplaced. The main purpose of religious pluralism is as a counter-position to religious exclusivism or naturalism (Eck 2005, p. 21-50). Exclusivism or naturalism, by implication, began the debate claiming only one religion, or no religions, have some positive attribute (like being true), and pluralism simply responds with the counter-claim; no, many religions have that attribute. So, pluralism never attempts to answer the question, what is good about, or gives value to a religion. It is simply responding to what it believes are incorrect claims.

Finally, even if you could and did evaluate religious attributes, it seems rather obvious that religions will have some good elements that are held in common with other religions and some good elements which they uniquely hold. So, both of these views, which claim that all the good elements of a religion fall into either the in common basket, or the unique basket, seem completely at odds with the reality of religions. In short, this whole concept has nothing to do with pluralism and seems highly flawed, so it should not be considered.

Harrison (2015, p. 257) also divides pluralisms into two main categories. The first are called Attitudinal pluralisms which are simply emotional responses to religious diversity. The second are Methodological pluralisms and are higher level theoretical responses to religious diversity. It is these second type of pluralisms, which offer solutions to the problem of religious diversity, that will be the focus of this paper.
Considering specific pluralisms, Legenhausen (2009, p. 18) defines seven different types according to different values that religions possess, namely Soteriological, Normative, Epistemological, Alethic, Ethical, Deontological, and Hermetic. He says there are other forms of religious pluralism, but these seven are the most important ones. Tuggy (2017) defines four different types of philosophical pluralisms being Core, Ultimist, Identist, and Expedient Means. Ruhmkorff (2013) outlines three different types of pluralisms which are, Ontological, Perspectivalism, and Pragmatism. And in yet another classification scheme Min (1997) gives us six different types of pluralism called, Phenomenalist, Universalist, Soteriocentric, Ontological, Confessionalist, and Dialectical. Each of these different types of pluralism will be discussed below, and ordered from least to most important35 as a solution to the problem of religious diversity36. In addition, I have attached a quick, simple label in parenthesis, next to the names of the most important types, to aid the layman’s comprehension of these sometimes complex philosophical concepts.

My method for assessing the importance of a type of pluralism is based upon seven criteria; namely:

1. Relevance to the problem of religious diversity
   
   The pluralism has some relation to the problem of religious diversity and actually makes an attempt to solve the problem. This almost certainly entails that it deals with incompatible truth claims.

2. Employs a realist understanding of truth

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35 I am not intending to make a scientific endeavour out of ranking various forms of pluralism. My assessment of each type of pluralism will be clear in the critical commentaries that follow. My goal in ordering them from least to most important is simply to give the reader a rough idea of how they fair relative to each other and to create a general sense of moving towards a solution to the problem of religious diversity as the reader works thorough the paper. Any ordering such as these is only approximate and subject to my own preferences and biases.

36 I am ranking broad categories of pluralism. Beneath each category there are specific types of pluralism and these can vary enormously in quality and importance.
Non-realist interpretations aren’t of great use. The goal is to solve the problem, not imagine it away.

3. Retains the formal logical meaning of truth
   Non-traditional logics don’t carry much weight. Solutions should be common sense understandings that don’t require the use of unorthodox logic theories.

4. Logical consistency and sound reasoning
   The model breaks no rules of logic and its conclusions are supported by its premises.

5. Acceptability to religious people
   This is who the model is created for. If the model doesn’t work for these people then it is of little use.

6. Explanatory power in depth and scope
   The model fits the religious data and accounts for social, historical, demographic, or scientific aspects of that data.

7. Simplicity of claims
   When faced with two models of equal value the simpler one is always preferred.

Criteria number five, acceptability to religious people, deserves some further discussion because some may find it controversial. Why should being acceptable to users constitute an appropriate yardstick for assessing a model? One would have thought models should be judged solely on the merits of their logical coherency and explanatory power.

I agree with this reasoning, however I think that this is a situation which justifies the inclusion of this additional criteria for several reasons. First, none of the theoretical responses in the threefold model are scientific theories. One can’t claim to have a whole bunch of evidence here to back up the theory, so it doesn’t matter what people think about it. The three responses are more like theodicies. They are possible
explanations for the problem of religious diversity. If the explanation is inconsistent with someone’s worldview, then it is a poor explanation for them. The theodicy fails. It would be like explaining away the problem of evil by claiming, there is no god. This is a completely unacceptable explanation for the religious person who is the one which requires an explanation. This can’t be a theodicy. So, if the theory isn’t acceptable to religious people, it has no use. It can’t stand on its own as a scientific theory. Its only purpose is to satisfy religious people.

A second reason is that the users of pluralistic models have already abandoned a purely meritorious approach to choosing models, by the simple fact that they prefer a religious model. As far as the problem of religious diversity is concerned, it is difficult to argue that any religious model bests the naturalist model. This model coherently, simply, and powerfully explains the diversity of religions. Human beings have a natural cognitive tendency to invent explanations for phenomena they cannot explain. Religious claims are all myths and thus one would expect to see no logical consistency to them, as well as an abundance of contradictions. There isn’t a single religious model that comes close to this model in explaining the religious data in a logical coherent fashion.

It seems to me that most religious people have an a priori assumption that there are at least some truths in religion, most notably their own. The naturalist model contradicts that basic assumption and so gets rejected. End of story. Since, given this a priori assumption, most religious people are exclusivists, a good pluralist model is going to be trying to move them to pluralism. But if all a pluralist model can offer are arguments which contradict their a priori assumptions, then this goal is doomed to failure just like it was for the naturalist model.

As we shall soon see, some pluralist models such as John Hick’s famous identist pluralism, go down this path and attempt to win allegiance based upon logical argumentation alone. But they don’t fare well as very few religious practitioners
accept Hick’s model. So a good pluralistic model won’t try to defeat an exclusivist model, as this is probably an impossible task.

A much better tactic for pluralistic models is to try to incorporate exclusivist models. Many, such as relativism, utilise exactly this method. But as will be apparent below, going too far in this direction creates its own problems. The most successful pluralistic models seek to both incorporate a priori exclusivist views and logically argue the superiority of pluralism. So being acceptable to religious people remains a critical criteria for assessing the success of any pluralistic model. Now let’s look at the specific types of pluralisms.

3.1 Pragmatic Pluralism

Pragmatic pluralism is the view that religious claims can be considered true if they are efficacious in accomplishing soteriological goals (Ruhmkorff 2013, p. 513). This flavour of pluralism is also known as Expedient Means pluralism (Tuggy 2017). The basic idea here is that the truth doesn’t matter as long as it gets the job done. Hick (2004, p. xxxiii) is the most influential pluralist who tries to justify such a strategy. He differentiates between literal and mythical truths, stating that mythical truths are not really true but should be considered true if they invoke an appropriate dispositional attitude in the listener.

It seems to me that this strategy borders on unethical. The very definition of myth includes the words fictional, and false. So this is just another example of pluralists desperately trying to inject the revered word ‘true’ into their theories which consider religious claims to be falsities. Wouldn’t it be better to honestly say, this is myth. It is untrue. But its purpose is for you to learn something important from the story. However, then your model probably wouldn’t attract as many proponents as if you stated the claims were mythical truths.
The more important point with pragmatic pluralism is that it is not really a form of pluralism but rather a strategy that other forms of pluralism use to explain incompatible truths. It could almost be considered a form of alethic pluralism because it does argue that the incompatible claims of multiple religions can be considered true and explains how. If it was placed in that group it would be a very poor form of alethic pluralism because its method lacks any logical argument, but instead very liberally redefines the word ‘truth’. However, I still think it is best to consider it only a strategy rather than a proper form of pluralism because the newly redefined “truth” must be effective in accomplishing something. This implies there must be some other objective in mind and the redefinition is not some standalone process.

Pragmatic pluralism is a popular strategy wielded by pluralists of all different types. As mentioned above, Hick, who is known as an Identist pluralist, is a firm advocate of this strategy. Similarly, Knitter, who is the example that Ruhmkorff (2013, pp. 518-519) places into this category is much more widely known as an ethical or soteriocentric pluralist. But since pragmatic pluralism is not really a pluralism but only a strategy to justify pluralism, it should be removed from the list of possible pluralisms.

3.2 Normative Pluralism

Normative pluralism is the view that members of all religions should be treated with human dignity. Harrison (2015, p. 257) would categorise this as a type of attitudinal pluralism which she says is “simply a positive attitude towards diversity”. Said another way, one should treat members of all different religious beliefs equally (Legenhausen 2009, p. 22). Taken to extremes this would make it difficult to even form
a religious community. But less extreme versions would mean, at the very least, that there is no discrimination towards members of any religious community.

To someone outside of any religious community this type of pluralism probably seems very strange. After all, shouldn’t everyone be treated with dignity? Why is this even a religious issue? But Legenhausen (2009, p. 23) notes that some religious members hold the view that they have absolutely no obligations to anyone outside of their religion. Thus, we know there are at least some exclusivists on this issue. However this would seem to be a rather exceptional view, so there are likely very few of them.

Given that normative pluralism is an attitudinal pluralism and so doesn’t deal with the problem of religious diversity, it is of no interest to us. And since most people would be pluralists of this type anyway, it isn’t even very important or interesting within that category.

3.3 Deontological Pluralism

Deontological pluralism is the view that any religion will suffice to fulfil one’s obligations to the ultimate reality. Which religion one decides to do this with is an issue of personal choice (Legenhausen 2009, p. 34-35). This is another type of pluralism which is rarely written about and some might not even consider it a proper type of religious pluralism. The whole concept of having an obligation to the ultimate reality seems like a theistic concept and it is doubtful it would even make sense to practitioners of many eastern religions. Either way, deontological pluralism is only tangential to the problem of religious diversity. It does offer something of a response, but provides nothing in terms of a logical argument as to why such a response is correct and it doesn’t even attempt to explain any data.
3.4 Ontological Pluralism

Ontological pluralism is the view that pluralism is a fundamental aspect of reality itself. Reality is an irreducible multiplicity of dimensions (Min 2010, p. 60). We will look at two different versions of ontological pluralism. First, that of Raimon Panikkar, one of the foremost proponents of ontological pluralism, who takes what might be called a “beyond reason” approach to ontological pluralism. Second we will look at Process Theology from the likes of John Cobb who do still operate very much within the realm of reason. However it is a reasoning that few others agree with.

3.8.1 Panikkar’s pluralism is the model adopted by Raimon Panikkar which says that religious diversity is not a theoretical problem and thus it has no theoretical solution. It is beyond the limits of all theory and is an existential problem (Panikkar 1987, p. 125). This version of ontological pluralism holds that there is no such thing as absolute truth or absolute knowledge because our intellect is limited, but more importantly because intellect itself is limited. Being transcends the level of intellect and remains irreducible and other to intellect (Min 2010, p. 64).

So what are we to make of Panikkar’s pluralism? Turner (2010, p. 6) states that such ontological pluralism has received little attention in the literature, and what attention it has received has been extremely negative. Most philosophers believe that it is untenable, perhaps unthinkable, and has been thoroughly refuted. But then Turner goes on to argue (p. 13-34) that none of the arguments against it actually succeed. But perhaps this is not surprising, given that the whole idea of this ontological pluralism is meant to be beyond logic.

In reading about Panikkar’s ontological pluralism the one thing that strikes me is that Panikkar has a serious agenda against logic and rationalism which he sees as a Western evil. Panikkar believes that the existing “varieties of pluralism
are inadequate to the challenge of the contemporary world, which is to radically overcome the practical expression of Western monism” (Min 2010, p. 62). He says, “Intellectualism is imperialism” and talks about how we must overcome the “dictatorship of reason” (Panikkar, 1987, pp. 120-124). All these hostile words leave one wondering whether this is a legitimate theory or just someone’s non-intellectual reaction to their perception of Western domination.

Delving into the theory a bit further, Panikkar (1987, pp. 142 – 148) says we must have a “cosmic trust in the ultimate harmony of opposites” and that we must have “acceptance without understanding”. The goal of ontological pluralism should be a “convergence of hearts” (Min 2010, p. 63). The first two quotes sound very much like religious faith, and the goal of convergence of hearts sounds like a social agenda rather than any kind of proper theory.

About truth Panikkar states that, “truth itself is neither one nor many but pluralistic” (p. 65). He explains that it is this way for two reasons. First, truth “is relational to the irreducibly unique context of each person, each culture, and each religion”, and second, because truth “requires complementation by other dimensions of being such as goodness, beauty, materiality, and spirituality” (p. 65). His first reason sounds like some form of relativism, and his second reason seems to suggest that there is some form of ‘reason’ (my word, not Panikkar’s) which encompasses aesthetic, ethical and spiritual dimensions and is superior, or at least able to comprehend more, than normal intellectual reason.

Regarding religions, Panikkar (1987, pp. 127-132) compares them to the “many colours of nature” each revealing the “pluralism of being itself” and a “symphony of different voices in an orchestra” (Min 2010, p. 68). Try as I might, I just don’t comprehend the relationship between this analogy and religious difference. The colours of nature are not in any way incompatible with each other, and voices in an orchestra are supposed to harmonise. So I can’t
understand how this would even begin to explain the contradictions found amongst religions.

There are several common criticisms of Panikkar’s theory. First, his theory sounds like sort of a meta-Hick’s theory. Here it is not just the Real that is ineffable, but all of reality (Min 2010, p. 71). Second, would religious people accept this theory? Some of the Eastern religious may, but as Min (p. 72) points out, various versions of monotheism will likely not because part of their very ontology is to make many absolute claims.

Finally, Panikkar says that reality isn’t reducible to a theory, yet isn’t his whole view of ontological pluralism itself a theory? But maybe it is not a theory, but rather just another faith. However that would be an even worse outcome. Why would anyone who holds some faith, switch their allegiance to this new type of faith? You can’t use logic to get you anywhere near this faith, and few people are going to be born into anything like this faith. So how would anyone ever come to accept it?

In summary, of all the pluralist theories, Panikkar’s ontological pluralism is the most incomprehensible of the lot. Panikkar himself felt that this “intrinsic pluralism of being prohibits all reduction of being to the intelligible” (Min, p. 64). So, if we take his word for it, that it can’t be discussed intelligibly, maybe it shouldn’t even be considered a philosophical model. It does have the attractive attribute of dealing with the problem of religious diversity head on. But until someone can explain why this concept isn’t a faith, and why it should be given status alongside of logical analysis, it’s very difficult give it serious consideration.

3.8.2 Process Theology is a pluralistic model based on the metaphysics of Alfred Whitehead. Whitehead himself didn’t have much to say about the
application of his metaphysics to religion, but John Cobb was the first one to apply this Whiteheadian metaphysics to religion in his 1965 classic ‘A Christian Natural Theology’. David Griffin (2005), Cobb’s colleague, later took up the mantle of Process Theology with his book ‘Deep Religious Pluralism’.

Whitehead’s basic metaphysics claims that the fundamental building blocks of reality are not matter. He believes that all things change and everything is a process. The fundamental things are “occasions of experience” that overlap with one another in time and space (Cobb, 2007, p.5).

Process Theology claims that there are three Ultimates being ‘Creativity’, God, and the Universe. Creativity is the underlying process of these occasions of experience. God is a manifestation of the creative process, and the Universe, or all material objects, are another. Cobb claims that these three Ultimates encompass the three different types of religion, namely theistic, cosmic, and acosmic (Griffin 2005, p. 47-49).

So this is just a type of differential pluralism (see below) which holds that all the different types of salvations are possible at the same time. In section 3.7 we will see that differential pluralism falls apart because it is logically impossible for all these different types of salvations to occur. However, with Process Theology the idea is borrow Whiteheadian metaphysics to ontologically change the logic of reality. By doing this one can make the seemingly impossible become possible. Cobb himself admits (2007, p. xviii) that the entire basis of Process Theology presupposes Whiteheadian metaphysics. So if you don’t agree with that, you can’t even begin to accept Process Theology.

Thus, the main problem with Process Theology is its utter dependence on Whiteheadian metaphysics. This line of metaphysics has been around for nearly 100 years and makes many claims about the nature of reality, yet in all that time not a single one of them has been substantiated by physicists, and no
reputable physicist agrees with any of them. In fact, Whiteheadian metaphysics isn’t even taught in any universities. The whole topic is not only distained by physicists, it is basically disregarded by most philosophers as well. In fact, in all of John Hick’s books on pluralism, and despite being a colleague of Cobb at the same university, he never once mentioned Process Theology. He must have considered it unworthy of mention (Griffin 2005, p. 46). So, unless the metaphysics of Whitehead start to be accepted by the physics world, there is little reason to even contemplate Process Theology.

3.5 Ethical Pluralism

**Ethical pluralism** (All are Good) is the view that all religions promote better ethical behaviour or that all religions are equally right in their moral guidelines. Usually this view is defended by claiming that all religions have captured some common set of moral principles (Legenhausen 2009, p. 34). Knitter (1998, p. 187) refers to this as **Soteriocentric pluralism** because, in his view of religion, salvation consists of the promoting of human welfare for all and liberation for the poor and nonpersons. So, for him, salvation is more of an ethical endeavour than something spiritual.

Ethical pluralism is another extremely common type of pluralism. However it completely ignores the problem of religious diversity, other than possibly holding that ethics is the only remaining value in religion and everything else is a myth. But, many people and nearly all philosophers would agree that ethical norms can be arrived at independently from religion (Cottingham 2017, p. 131). So if this is religion’s only purpose, naturalism is a much better choice. In summary, ethical pluralism has little relevance to the problem of religious diversity and there isn’t a good logical argument for why it should even exist.
3.6 Soteriological Pluralism

Soteriological pluralism (All can Save) is the view that all religions are equally effective at guiding people to salvation (Legenhausen 2009, p. 18). This type of pluralism is conceptually problematic at best, but it is essential to mention because it is likely the most common type of pluralism and it was the first type of pluralism described by modern philosophical thought. The trouble with this type of pluralism is that it makes an assumption about what constitutes salvation. Since the holders of this view generally define salvation in the manner of their own religion, they end up being more like exclusivists than pluralists. For example, Hindus might consider themselves soteriological pluralists if they believed that Christianity provides a path that allows one to be released from samsara and become one with Brahman. However, Christians would hardly agree that Christianity does anything of the sort. They would argue that Christianity not only doesn’t help release one from samsara, but that no Christian desires to be released from samsara because samsara doesn’t even exist. So, in this example, the Hindus might be pluralists in their own minds but they are only liberal exclusivists, insisting on acceptance of the concept of samsara by members of other religions who don’t hold it.

Similarly, if salvation is defined more broadly to attempt to include many religions, as say John Hick has done, then it too will be rejected by members of the various religions. Hick (2004, p. xxvi) says salvation is “a transformation of human existence from natural self-centredness to a new orientation centred in the Transcendent, the Ultimate, the Real.” Yet other religions will all argue that this salvation is not a genuine salvation, but only some corrupted notion of salvation dreamed up in the mind of John Hick. Thus Hick is a soteriological pluralist only about his own unique version of salvation. And this is a type of salvation that few religious people would care about.
Soteriological pluralism is typically used in this manner, with members of one religion discussing pluralism about their own brand of salvation amongst themselves. So it is really an intrareligious doctrinal issue. What it should mean is that the various religions all obtain the salvation that they claim. But this type of pluralism already exists in the form of differential pluralism (see below). So soteriological pluralism, as the term should be used, is already accounted for and as the term typically is used, is a very narrow, uninteresting form of pluralism. Furthermore, it does nothing to explain the existence of religious diversity. Thus soteriological pluralism is of little importance beyond intra-religious debate.

### 3.7 Differential Pluralism

**Differential pluralism** (All are Different) is the view that all religions offer different types of salvations and may lead to different religious ultimates (Griffin 2005, p. 24). So differential pluralism is soteriologically pluralistic and may be ontologically pluralistic as well. As mentioned above, this type of pluralism could almost be called soteriological pluralism. But that term carries a distinct meaning which is only pluralistic in a very narrow sense, and so it is best to keep the two labels apart to prevent confusion.

Prothero (2010) and Heim (2003) are two well-known espousers of this pluralistic model. Prothero takes a more secular stance, never really speculating on the truth value of the various religion’s claims. He is not interested in trying to solve the problem of religious diversity. Instead, his is more of a social agenda to try and convince religions to get along better with each other. If they are truly different as he argues, then they have no competing goals or truth claims and, as such, should have little reason for conflict with each other. But his underlying position is the same. The various religions are irreconcilably different.
Heim, on the other hand, approaches the problem from a religious viewpoint and really is trying to come up with a theory to solve the problem of religious diversity. His hypothesis is that multiple salvations genuinely exist. Adherents of the various religions actually obtain the desired end that their religion offers them. So, for example, Christians can attain heaven, Buddhists can attain nirvana, and Hindus can obtain moksha.

This idea is, of course, the popular “Many Mountains” analogy of religion. As Prothero (2010, p. 16-17) so aptly puts it, “If practitioners of the world’s religions are all mountain climbers, then they are on very different mountains, climbing very different peaks, and using very different tools and techniques in their ascents.” So, in this model each religion is represented by a different mountain, each is very worthy of climbing, and at the peak of each lies the ‘salvation’ the climber is looking for.

At first glance, this is the best possible pluralistic model. There are no negative implications. All religions are preserved in their entirety, all truth claims are correct, there is no need to be concerned about other religions and no conflict with them, and given the value inherent in each religion, people should try to practice multiple religions if possible. But does it really work? On closer inspection I think not.

First, it is not clear to me that the three major monotheistic religions really are on different mountains seeking different salvations. Prothero claims that the challenge, or mountain, for Christianity is sin (p. 88), for Islam is self-sufficiency (p. 33), and for Judaism is exile (p. 212). However, I don’t think that these challenges are really mountains, but rather just different emphasises of each religion. Surely all three religions still care about sin, and likewise all three promote humility in the shadow of God. And the claim that exile is the challenge for a modern Jew just seems baffling. So these challenges would be more akin to slightly different paths than completely different mountains.
The way I see it is that these three religions are really all climbing the same mountain and worshiping the same God who presides over that mountain. And that God is going to provide the same salvation (heaven) to all those who are able to ascend the summit of that one mountain. I agree they are all using very different tools and probably even taking different paths to get to the top of the mountain. But, if the mountains are in fact the same, the whole idea of differential pluralism breaks down for more than half of the world’s population.

But assume Prothero is correct, and all religions are climbing different mountains. This idea would work if the salvic goals of each religion were truly independent of each other. But they are far from independent. Many of the goals implicitly, and in some cases explicitly, contradict each another. There can’t be multiple salvations because it is impossible for them to all exist. For example, Prothero (2010, p. 118) states the goal, or salvation, for Hindus is moksha, or release from the endless rebirth cycle of samsara. So here the mountain to be climbed is samsara and the salvation at the top is moksha. But what would Christians say about this mountain? They would say that not only is this mountain not worthy of climbing, but in fact, this mountain doesn’t even exist. It is an illusion because samsara is an illusion.

Granted Christianity does not teach anything about the existence of reincarnation, but is it somehow possible to work the concept of reincarnation into Christianity? Heim might argue that Christians could go through a cycle of reincarnation before they ultimately end up in the Christian heaven. There are probably no explicit contradictions with this idea, but there are many implicit ones. First, the Christian scriptures say that upon death one’s soul goes to either heaven or perhaps hell. There is no mention of any third possibility. Second, if Christians did have to suffer through endless reincarnations, what is the whole point of Jesus? He is supposed to save Christians from their sins in this life so they can obtain heaven. What would be the purpose of being reincarnated millions of times after you have already been forgiven the first time? Third, if there is one God as the Christians believe, why would it set up
two different systems so opposed to each other, and whose membership is largely determined by geography? Finally, even if you did somehow work out how to logically include reincarnation into the Christian faith, you then just hit another set of contradictions at the next level when you obtain moksha and are ready to go to heaven. Most Hindu’s don’t believe that on achieving moksha you go to heaven, but rather that you become one with Brahma. The Christians believe that you retain your personal identity and exist in a real paradisiacal place in community with God. These concepts are clearly so different as to be completely irreconcilable.

And that is the easy side of the equation deal with. Try reversing chairs and consider how the Hindu might work the concept of not being reincarnated and having Jesus save them from sin, in their own religion. They are likely to reply, as one rabbi famously did, “Jesus Christ is the answer to a question I have never asked” (Walls 1998, p.34).

Heim (2003, p. 7) provides a similar sort of reconciliation between Christians and Buddhists, speculating that perhaps Christians might transit in some heaven like place, which the Buddhists refer to as Tushita, on their way to the ultimate destination of nirvana, which is metaphorically explained as the extinguishing of a candle. However, the same sorts of problems that I have outlined in the Hindu case will inevitably occur. Heim (p. 21), in the end, concludes that each religion needs to have its own means to assimilate and affirm the validity of most of the other religion’s claims. Basically, everyone needs to figure out how many claims they can drop so we can make differential pluralism work. But to ever get this theory to work you would have to relinquish many claims at the very pinnacle of religious significance. In some cases, I think, you would be eliminating the very claims that substantiate the existence of a separate mountain. If you are going start travelling down this path, why not drop enough claims to join the core pluralism (All are One) camp, which is a much simpler, more intuitive concept.
Differential pluralism is to be commended for directly confronting the problem of religious diversity and offering a very complete and novel solution which would be perfectly acceptable to most religious adherents. However, when the details of this theory are examined, there are so many logical inconsistencies as to make it completely untenable.

3.8 Core Pluralism

Core pluralism (All are One) is the view that all religions share a common core. This is a well-known form of pluralism with a long history, and unlike most pluralisms, has real practicing advocates in nearly every religion. It is also a very worthy idea and if true, would help solve many religious differences. But the problem with this view is that scholars have been looking for a common core for as long as religions have been studied and nobody has found one yet (Rankin 2008, p. 172)(Kellenberger 1989, p. 117). With the possible exception of ethics, religions seem far too diverse to ever have a common core and there is no evidence they had one in the past either (Richards 1989, p. 84).

There are several different types of core pluralism, but I will confine myself here to perennialism which is not only the most popular variant, but also one that takes a somewhat different tact to the common core, making it more plausible than most.

3.8.1 Perennialism is the view that all religions share a common esoteric core and all lead to the same goal which is some perennial wisdom. Min (1997, p. 587) refers to this as Universalist pluralism in recognition of this theory’s underlying universal theology. Legenhausen (2009, p. 37) calls this Hermetic pluralism as to emphasise its esoteric leanings, and lists it as one of his seven major types of pluralism. Perennialism is a very common brand of pluralism
with many philosophers such as Leonard Swidler, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Ninian Smart, and Keith Ward all falling into this camp (Min 1997, p. 587).

Perennialism became widely known with the release of Aldous Huxley’s (1947) book titled ‘The Perennial Philosophy’. In his book (p. 1) he describes it as

the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal.

He goes on to say (p. 1),

Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions.

So, basically the claim is made that this form of ‘religion’ has been around as long as humankind, and it bubbles up in the mystical traditions of every major religion, and the common core is to be found in mystical experiences.

There is a real push for religious universalism here and Huxley’s book is largely a collection of quotations from religions and mystics emphasising the oneness of all. Given that the esoteric side of religions tend to shy away from making specific claims and instead emphasise concepts like love, oneness, and eternity, which don’t obviously contradict each other, this is the major focus of Huxley’s book, and it reads like classical mysticism.

Huxley’s book came under sharp criticism in the years after its publication and he was roundly rebuked for blurring the distinctions between religions and especially different types of mystical experiences. Huston Smith took up the mantle as chief campaigner for perennialism with his 1958 book titled, ‘The Religions of Man’. In this book, he acknowledged the criticisms of overreaching
on the similarity claims, but rejected most of them and came out as a firm advocate of the oneness of all religions (Hughes 1992, p. 28).

Perennialism never really overcame its stigma of being so closely aligned with mysticism and to this day is still considered as being on the fringes of pluralistic theories. But this point of view is not completely justified and Smith did a good job in trying to bring some respectability back to the theory. He feels that Huxley was unfairly tainted with a mystical title, and his message of rationality and deduction got lost in all the mystical meanderings. Quoting Huxley, he writes “The core of the Perennial Philosophy” is “doctrines” (Smith 1987, p. 554). Continuing, Huxley says (p. 554),

> The doctrines derive from metaphysical intuitions, and it is to these that the perennial philosophy appeals. To discern the truth of a metaphysical axiom one need not have an "experience." The ontological discernments of pure intellection . . . have nothing to do with mystical rapture or access to states of "pure consciousness"

The doctrines above that Huxley refers to are (p. 554):

1. First: the phenomenal world is the manifestation of a Divine Ground.
2. Second: human beings are capable of attaining immediate knowledge of that ground.
3. Third: in addition to their phenomenal egos, human beings possess an eternal Self which is of the same or like nature with the divine Ground.
4. Fourth: this identification is life's chief end or purpose.

From this basic doctrine, one deductively arrives at the following claims (p. 562-64).

1) There is one Absolute.
2) There is revelation.
The single Absolute would have to make its children aware of its existence and would do so in a fair, impartial manner.

3) The great religions contain knowledge of that one Absolute. The Absolute would not have allowed these religions to persist for so long if they contained only errors.

4) Different religions make whole the Absolute’s nature by seeing it from different angles, but each is sufficient to provide salvation.

5) While the esoteric side of religion is to be encouraged, more concrete formulations in the form of historical religions are also required.

6) It is this canonisation of religion that creates errors and contradictions.

7) Where religions contradict, we cannot say where the real truth lies. The Absolute is ineffable so it can be difficult to understand. “Revelation fractionates like light through a prism”.

Let’s begin to analyse this model now. It starts much like Hick’s model (see below). There is a nearly ineffable Absolute which we can’t know much about. But it doesn’t go as far as Hick and claims that we can know some things, and the most important things we do know. This seems like a positive step, abandoning the near total ineffability that Hick assumes. When you read my analysis of Hick’s model below, you will see that doing so would negate many of the criticisms I have of his model. Allowing some visibility into the nature of the Absolute allows religious people to embrace the model, religions themselves to coexist with the model, and better explains the formation of religions.

However, in allowing some knowledge of the Absolute, it is likely that certain religions will contain more truth and thus be more valuable than others. This was a big problem that Hick wanted to avoid because it goes against the grain of pluralism and can lead to some degree of exclusivism. This is not a major
issue if there remains doubt about what is actually known, as with epistemological pluralism. But when you clearly spell out what you do know, it does become a real problem and the Perennialists seem to have been caught in this trap with just the little bit of knowledge they claim can be known. Despite the Perennialists calling their ultimate the Absolute, their deductions sound very monotheistic. From these deductions we can see that the Absolute certainly is conscious, has wants and desires, and interacts in human society. This would tend to undermine many of the Eastern religions, and bring into question whether this is really a pluralistic model at all.

But in fairness to perennialism these are Smith’s deductions rather than Huxley’s original doctrines which are much more ambiguous about the nature of the Absolute. So perhaps Smith just deducted wrongly. If you look at Huxley’s third doctrine above, he says that the soul is either similar to, or identical with, the divine Reality. This opens up the potential for either a monotheistic or pantheistic interpretation. But even so, the fact that humans do have souls would seem to rule Buddhism out of the equation.

Notwithstanding, I could envision the perennialists saying that is not such a bad outcome. Hick’s model tried so hard to not rule out any religion, that he lost the interest of all the religions. And it is possible Buddhism is just wrong. It is a logical impossibility for the important truth claims of the all major religions to all be correct. So, if one of the major religions has to be left out to make the model work, then perhaps that is price worth paying. Smith, a professor of religious studies, was incredibly fond of employing empirical analysis (Smith 1987, p. 582) to support his deductions. In that vein he could easily argue that, although Buddhism does not believe in Gods, most Buddhists do. To him, perfect evidence of those fundamental Absolute inspired intuitions rising to the surface, in spite of the home religion teaching against such views.
However, the real bottom line for perennialism is that differences between religions are just not important. How pluralism works for the Perennialists is that the Absolute lets us know, without doubt, those things that we need to know. Anything else is just speculation, highly subject to error because of its basic ineffability. The common core is what counts. Yes, some religions have it more right than other religions, but that doesn’t matter either. Beyond the common core elements, no one can know which religions are superior and they believe all are sufficient to make one aware of the divine Reality. So the Perennialists employ a good dose of epistemological pluralism in their model as well.

What is most important is to try and get the eternal self in contact with the divine Reality through mystical experience. And if that doesn’t work, then you should read the works of famous mystics, and study the doctrines of the great religions (Hughes 1992, p. 30).

We can see that perennialism stitches together a variety of other forms of pluralism in a unique way that, if true, provides a reasonable solution to the problem of religious diversity. For the common core truths it is a form of alethic pluralism. For the remaining religious claims it relies on a combination of epistemological pluralism to remain agnostic on most issues, and some degree of Hick’s transcendental pluralism to account for the existence of differences. But it doesn’t accept transcendental pluralism to such a great extent that it ends up alienating most religious adherents as Hick does.

Its main weakness is that most scholars wonder whether any truths could really be considered common core, and even among proponents there are wide differences of opinion as to what truths belong in the common core. If a common core is present at all, it is extremely ambiguous and no doubt quite limited, so at best it offers only a slight improvement upon Hick’s model. It also
seems somewhat incoherent because the Absolute is said to let us know these core truths without doubt, yet no one can agree on what they are or if they even exist. So one is forced to conclude that either there is no Absolute or it isn’t doing a very good job, both deductions being incompatible with perennialism.

However, to some degree perennialism sidesteps these concerns because the real common core in perennialism is mysticism. This is an easy place to find a common core because every religion has a mystical side and mystics don’t make many truth claims, so it is difficult to find much disagreement. But pushing everyone towards a mystical path seems like a desperate measure. If religious followers were all mystics to begin with then there wouldn’t be much religious difference and we wouldn’t need any form of pluralism. So, to make this shift towards mysticism is like saying, there is no way to reconcile all these incompatible truth claims so let’s go someplace where there are no truth claims and then we won’t have these problems. Finally, for those that cannot or do not wish to involve themselves with the mystical side of their religion, the whole idea of perennialism may not be very useful.

In conclusion, perennialism makes an attempt to deal with incompatible truth claims but, as with all core pluralisms, it doesn’t get very far. To remain viable it then leads us down the abyss of mysticism, which allows it to escape some of the problems of core pluralism, but does so at a cost (giving up truth claims) which exceeds that of the problem.

### 3.9 Identist Pluralism

**Identist pluralism** (All Lead to One) is the view that all religions lead to a single religious ultimate and offer the same salvation. In the book *Deep Religious Pluralism* David Ray Griffin (2005, p. 24) coined this term to refer to pluralisms that hold religions are identical both ontologically and soteriologically. This type of pluralism
is known\(^\text{37}\) by other names such as \textbf{Monistic pluralism} and \textbf{Monocentric pluralism} (Schmidt-Leukel 2017, pp. 158-59). In addition, John Hick’s philosophical model, which has become virtually synonymous with pluralism, falls into this category.

Before I begin describing Hick’s model I should make the point that identist pluralism is the home for the very well-known pluralistic religious analogy of One Mountain/Different Paths. Gandhi may have been most responsible for putting this picture in the public’s mind when he said, “Religions are different roads converging to the same point,” and asked “What does it matter if we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal?” (Burch 1972, p. 111).

This analogy was described in detail above under differential pluralism, so I won’t do so again here. Applying a similar analytical approach to this idea as I did with the Many Mountains analogy earlier, this One Mountain/Different Paths approach seems to offer a good solution to the problem of religious diversity. All the contradictions between religions are just cultural manifestations that occur down in the foothills of the climb (Smith 1991, p. 73). But once you near the summit all the paths converge, and at the very peak all arrive at the one and the same salvation. But is this really true? Are the conflicts down at the foothill level and are all the salvations really the same? Once again, I think not.

While you probably can get away with this model if you confine it to the monotheistic religions, as soon as you venture much beyond there the model quickly breaks down. As I described in my comparison of Christianity and Hinduism in the differential pluralism section above, the contradictions in religious claims occur right up near the summit of the mountain, and in fact the most important ones, involve the very summit (or salvation) itself. Any similar attempt to reconcile one of the monotheistic religions with Buddhism and its concept of \textit{anatman} (no-self) would fair even worse. So on the

\(^{37}\) Incorrectly in my view. These terms would more appropriately apply to core pluralism which claims that all religions \textit{are} one rather than just \textit{lead} to one. But I merely report how they are currently used.
face of it, this One Mountain/Different Paths model just cannot be correct. However, there have been many clever philosophers who have come up with proposals to try salvage the One Mountain model. And no doubt the most creative and successful of them all is John Hick, with his transcendental model. We will turn our attention to that model next.

3.9.1 **Transcendental Pluralism** (Hick’s model) is the view that all the great religions are oriented toward the same religious ultimate and have an identical salvic goal\(^{38}\), which is the transformation from focusing on the self to focusing on the ultimate. This ultimate, which he calls the ‘Real’, is ineffable and beyond the range of our human conceptual systems. All religions are simply human interpretations of this imperceptible Real, and are influenced by our diverse cultural, linguistic and spiritual traditions (Hick 2004, p. xix, xxvi).

Hick’s pluralism is also called **Philosophical pluralism** by many such as D’Costa (1996, p. 226), more or less implying that there are no other philosophical theories of pluralism. This gives an indication of how truly dominant this theory is in the area of religious diversity. But this is clearly not a good term because, as I am showing here, there are many different types of philosophical pluralism. Min (1997, p. 587) calls Hick’s pluralism **Phenomenalist pluralism** due to the claim that the religious interpretations are simply phenomenal responses to the ineffable Real.

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\(^{38}\) Hick’s model sounds very much like soteriological pluralism. But there is one major difference and that is why his model wasn’t placed into that category. In soteriological pluralism each religion talks about other religions obtaining the salvation of my religion. This is quite similar to Hick saying that all religions will obtain his salvation. But the difference is that Hick’s model is not a religion and nor is he trying to create one. His model is better understood to be saying, the salvation of all the religions is the same; they just don’t know it. Other religion’s don’t usually make this claim and never provide the theoretical justification, as Hick does, to support such a claim.
The main implication from Hick’s hypothesis is that most religious truth claims are false. If absolutely nothing can be known of the Real then it is difficult to make correct claims. If you happen to have some religious claims which are true, it was by luck because it is impossible to obtain information from something that is ineffable. This leads directly into two major criticisms of Hick’s model. The first is that most religious adherents do not accept that their religion consists of primarily false claims. This is just too costly of a move for most religious people to ever make. They would probably rather live without a good explanation of religious diversity than accept this view. Hick specifically created his model for religious people, to give them a religious interpretation of religion (Hick 2010, p. 14). But, if few religious people would ever accept the conditions of his pluralistic model then he largely failed in this goal.

Secondly, even if Hick was correct, and religious adherents were convinced by his model, what would be left of the world’s existing religions? How could people retain their religious affiliations with institutions that are composed almost entirely of falsehoods? Hick’s version of religion is slightly better than naturalism, in that at least some aspect of the supernatural is retained. But not much is kept. Nearly all traditional religious tenants would likely be abandoned, irreparably damaging existing religions. As one critic so aptly put it, “if Hick’s . . . Reality is right, he should just keep it to himself” (Clark 1997, p. 319).

There are dozens more criticisms of Hick’s model. This is not so much a function of the quality of the model but simply a reflection of the fate that awaits any model that achieves so much recognition. Hundreds of books and thousands of papers have been written which discuss Hick’s model. Therefore, in this case, rather than retracing well-trotted ground, I am going to confine my
criticisms to those that I consider important, but also underrepresented or non-existent in the literature.

The single most important part of Hick’s theory is that the Real is ineffable, because Hick claims that it is this ineffability which accounts for the diversity of religions. If the real is not ineffable then Hick’s whole theory falls apart because he offers no solution to the problem of religious diversity.

This leads us into problem number one. Many critics ask, if the Real is ineffable then how do you know anything about it? How can religions be formed based upon something that no one knows anything about? Hick’s answer is that we do know some things about it; those that are within our human capacities to know. In his words, “we can experience the Real as its presence is mediated to us in the forms made possible by our limited human cognitive capacities” (Hick 2004, p. xxii). This is very interesting, for here we learn that the Real is actually not completely ineffable. But if the Real is effable within the limits of our human capacities, and if our human capacities include being able to distinguish the difference between none, one, and many, then why do Buddhism, monotheism, and Hinduism arrive at such radically different conceptions of that Real? Hick might respond that what we know about the Real is limited to our experiential cognitive capacity, and this in no way implies that we can know everything within our overall cognitive capacity. However, Hick’s model provides no justification for why our experiential capacity would allow us to know something quite complicated such as the purported transformation that he claims is our soteriological goal, but not know something very simple such as if the Real is none, one or many.

Problem number two is that Hick borrows his notion of ineffability from the Kantian concept of phenomenal and noumenal worlds. But the trouble is that Kant thinks that there is only one phenomenal world and that all humans see
that phenomenal world the same (Neujahr 1995, p.25). Also, everyday life and all aspects of scientific endeavour indicate that humans see the same world, even if it is only phenomenal. So why does Hick think that that humans all see the phenomenal world so differently?

Critics, sceptical of the whole idea of ineffability, asked Hick (p. xxiii) if there are any analogies for a reality which has none of the conceivable and experienceable qualities as those humans perceive it to have. His answer is a table. Millions of sub atomic particles in continuous and rapid motion through largely empty space. But the problem with this analogy is that all humans still see it as a table. And all of our machines and scientific equipment, that sight the entire object at once, also still see it as a table. No person or thing sees it as a multitude of different realities.

Problem number three is, even if Hick is right, and the Real is ineffable, why should it be beyond the capacity of that Real to transmit information to humans? Why can’t there be religious experiences or revelations that provide one with simple, easily understood information? Why must it be the case that all religious experiences are so incomprehensible that they can be interpreted in a multitude of different ways? Surely something as powerful as the Real is conceived to be, should be able to translate some information down to a human level of understanding.

And if there are religious experiences originating from the Real as Hick concedes they must (otherwise we wouldn’t know that the Real is there to orient ourselves towards) why would that Real want them to be so unintelligible? What is the point of transmitting information if it is only going to be misinterpreted in thousands of different ways as Hick postulates? Hick’s model offers no rational explanation for this incapacity of the Real and so it looks rather implausible.
This line of argument does assume that the Real is conscious. But Hick can’t defend himself by arguing that the Real is not conscious as this would create an even worse problem for him. If the real is not conscious then we know something about it and then his ineffability hypothesis been broken.

Problem number four is that Hick’s model is circular. Critics routinely point out that it is impossible for the Real to be ineffable because there exist many properties which either apply to it, or don’t apply to it. As soon as one of these choices is made we know something about the Real and then it is no longer ineffable. This is what happened in the case of Plantinga’s tricycle. Plantinga (2000, p. 45) famously says to Hick,

I take it the term 'tricycle' does not apply to the Real; the Real is not a tricycle. But if the Real is not a tricycle, then, 'is not a tricycle' applies literally to it; it is a nontricycle.

Surprisingly, Hick (2004, p. xxii) replied back,

I do indeed hold that the Real cannot properly be said to be either a tricycle or a non-tricycle.

But then he explains, saying,

Plantinga’s argument that the Real must be either a tricycle or a non-tricycle, if carried over from the trivial to the significant, produces the claim that the Real must be either a personal or a non-personal reality; and this would at a stroke falsify either all the theistic or all the non-theistic religions. … either way it would be unacceptable from a global religious point of view.

Here we have an admission that his theory is not based upon any reason, but simply is that way because it has to be that way to be an acceptable pluralistic viewpoint. So, recall we began with the need to build a pluralistic model to explain religious diversity. This pluralistic model has to contain an ineffable Real because that is what explains religious diversity. But why is the Real
ineffable? Because it has to be that way or it wouldn’t be a pluralistic model. This seems like a perfect example of a circular model.

Problem number five is that even if you completely accept the concept of ineffability, it doesn’t fulfil its goal of doing a good job in accounting for the differences in the world’s religions.

Here is Hick describing the process of how experiencing the ineffable Real leads to the creation of a religion (p. xxxi).

> Christian theology spells out the Christian image, whilst Islamic theology spells out the Muslim image, of the ultimate. But both (and the many other such) images are, according to the pluralistic hypothesis, human images arising at the interface of the Real and human minds39, given form by the different conceptualities and associated spiritual practices of the different streams of religious life.

So Hick is asserting that someone in history had an ineffable religious experience and then, given their existing spiritual practices and conceptualities they interpreted this experience into something that would eventually become a full blown religion such as Christianity or Islam. Along the way, various myths were developed that would fill in the blanks and give the religion substance and definition.

Now consider how Christianity describes their own creation40 in the conversion story of Paul the Apostle (known as Saul before his conversion) on the road to Damascus.

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39 I am assuming that “the interface of the Real and human minds” is some sort of religious experience. I don’t know what else it could mean. And given the Real is ineffable, so too would the experience have to be.

40 Some Christians may disagree with calling Paul’s conversion the creation of Christianity. However most scholars consider Paul to be the founder of Christianity and agree that without Paul, Christianity may never have become the major religion that it is (Wilson 2008, p. 168).
As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

"Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

— Acts 9:3–9, NIV

The stories of Abraham, and Mohammed, the founders of Judaism and Islam, are similar. Each had a first-hand revelatory experience where direct quotations are attributed to the Real. So, the obvious question arises, if the Real is so ineffable, how can it make easily understandable statements to people in their own languages? Even ignoring the quotations, it is simply impossible to claim that such detailed dialogical accounts arose out of the ineffability of their experiences. Simply put, the specificity of these stories preclude them originating from ineffable experiences had by anyone. It is difficult to see any ineffability at all in the stories of how Judaism, Christianity, or Islam were created. So if these stories have even the slightest truth to them, the Real is not ineffable, and religious diversity can’t be explained by ineffability.

Also, where are the “conceptualities and associated spiritual practices” that Hick talks about in these religious formations? There weren’t any. There were direct transmissions of information from the Real. This is in complete disagreement with what Hick is claiming. Furthermore, in the case of Paul, his images of the ultimate, conceptualities and associated spiritual practices all would have been Jewish. So how did he acquire new ones that are different
enough to require the start of a new religion? Similar questions apply to Abraham and Mohammad whose backgrounds would have been pagan. Hick’s model can’t explain these radical transformations resulting in new religions.

Hick may counter by saying, it wasn’t the dialogue that was ineffable, it was the source of the dialogue. There could have been an actual dialogue that they interpreted as being from the Real. However, if this were the case then there are only two options to consider. If the dialogue was with the Real, then the Real is not ineffable. If the dialogue was not with the Real, then there was a mistaken attribution and the sources of religion aren’t the Real, but something else dependent upon human error. Neither option helps Hick at all.

Hick would then almost certainly reply, but these stories are just myths. None of them really happened. Someone had an ineffable experience and then these myths were created during the evolution of the religion to give it more depth. However, this explanation is very unlikely for Christianity or Islam. Both Paul and Muhammad were real historical figures and scholars are very sure that they originated these stories (Aune 2010, pp. 9) (Berg 2006, p. 187). If the founders of the religions said these stories occurred and they didn’t, then these religions originated from fabrications and have nothing to do with the Real.

Finally, let’s consider the possibility that the scholars are wrong and the founders didn’t originate these stories, but they were added later. In Hick’s model, these founders, or someone claiming to be them, had an ineffable experience and conveyed that experience. These original experiences probably sounded much like the mystical writings of various religions, where something ineffable is being described. Such lack of detail would allow for many widely varying interpretations which could then explain the existence of different religions. Then over time, as the religion became mythologised and canonised, various details and specific doctrines would have been added.
The problem with this theory is that for both Christianity and Islam we have strong evidence that these writings, which include many of pages of doctrine as well as an abundance of specific detail, occurred very early in the history of the religion (Wall 2002, p. 373) (Donner 1998, pp. 60-61). There simply wasn’t enough time for mythologising to have been responsible for all this detail. Someone had to have concocted these stories\(^{41}\), in which case their origin is unrelated to the Real.

Some might ask, what is the difference between mythologising and concocting? The difference between concocting, which is wilful corruption, and mythological embellishment is huge, with the latter being understandable while the former is indefensible. With mythologising the purpose is to add depth to an already well established religion. The key point here is that the religion began much earlier so the embellishment had no role in its creation. Secondly, because the religion started so long ago, nobody knows what really happened, so the newly added story could possibly have occurred. Such embellishment adds depth to the religion and is somewhat understandable\(^{42}\).

Completely opposite is the case where the founder or someone very early in the religion’s history, who does know what happened, did the changing. This is just corruption. Its purpose is to deceive, making the story more believable so that a newly established group can gain followers. Because this sort of deception could be instrumental in the creation of the religion, you can’t claim that the religion originated from the Real, even if the Real actually was ineffable.

\(^{41}\) And given the amount of material involved and the numerous first-hand accounts of interactions with the Real, it would have been fabrication on a massive scale as well.

\(^{42}\) Note that Hick can’t claim that this mythmaking process is itself an interpretation of the Real either, for there is a big difference between creating stories about historical events that potentially could have happened, and honestly trying to interpret genuinely experienced phenomena that you don’t understand.
In such a case, religion is the product of human creativity and mendacity, not of any Real.

In summary, Hick’s use of ineffability as a critical concept in his model leaves it open to multiple problems. I have shown that his model is not consistent about ineffability, not true to Kantianism, not in accord with reality, circular, and unable to explain the formation of several existing religions. Coupled with the fact that it is of little use to any religious adherent, despite that being its purpose, I find no reason it should be considered an attractive form of pluralism.

3.9.2 Byrne’s Pluralism was created by well-known philosopher Peter Byrne (1995).\(^{43}\) It is another version of identist pluralism which was no doubt inspired by Hick’s model and retains many similarities. The biggest difference with Hick is that Byrne drops all the Kantian notions of ineffability and replaces it with an agnosticism about religious claims. In Byrne’s model (p. 23) “the sacred will exceed the ability of human thought to produce definitive, normative statements about its objects”. So now it is possible to know something about the ultimate reality, but it’s so at the fringe of human capacity to comprehend that we often get it wrong, or at the very least inject a huge dose of cultural bias into that understanding. Thus any religion could potentially be correct in its claims but we must remain agnostic because there is no objective way to establish any of those claims and resolve the differences.

This is an improvement upon Hick’s model because now religions are able to retain a realist view about their truth claims. However, because the ultimate reality remains almost ineffable, Byrne’s model is still subject to many of the

\(^{43}\) Byrne doesn’t give his version of pluralism any particular title so I have named it after him.
same criticisms I outlined about Hick’s model. Problem number three about why a theistic version of the real wouldn’t be able to overcome such ineffability, and if it’s not theistic how the model can remain pluralist seems equally pertinent. And problem number five about, how do you explain detailed revelatory accounts without concluding that most religious claims are simply fabrications seems very relevant as well. In addition, Byrne retains some concepts about the equality of religions which are problematic (Mawson 2005, p. 40, 48) and his definition of salvation is even more nebulous than Hick’s.

Overall, Byrne has made a small step in the right direction, but he needs to dramatically relax his views on the inability of humans to comprehend the ultimate reality, to better accommodate religious adherents and increase the coherency of his proposal.

3.10 Epistemological Pluralism

Epistemological pluralism (All are Reasonable) is the view that all religions are equally reasonable according to some criteria of epistemic justification or warrant. Applying different criteria of justification, epistemological pluralism can be broken down into epistemological agent pluralism, where the followers of different religions are said to be epistemologically equal; that is, they are epistemic peers, and a second category called epistemological belief pluralism, where the beliefs themselves carry equal justification (Legenhausen 2009, p. 26). All these types of pluralism would be more appropriately termed doxastic pluralisms, since they are concerned solely with beliefs rather than knowledge. But, let’s stick with this label because it is much more common.

I will focus on epistemic belief pluralism here because I think that most people, other than a few die-hard exclusivists, see little reason to conclude that members of other religions are not epistemic peers. An excellent recent rendition of epistemological belief pluralism can be found in McKim (2016). He calls it magnanimity and sketches
out a comprehensive case for epistemological pluralism. The key idea is that the religious world is filled with ‘rich ambiguity’ which is his label for a situation where five conditions are met (p. 240).

1. There is a significant amount of evidence for more than one perspective. None can be proven correct, and none is favoured by the evidence.
2. There are pockets of evidence which strongly support a particular view to one group.
3. The evidence is diverse and complicated.
4. There is disagreement about the status of the putative evidence.
5. The available evidence is super abundant.

When such a situation ensues, McKim says that the only rational conclusion one can make is to accept that others are as reasonable in their own view as we are in ours (p. 243). One fascinating implication of this conclusion is that, given such immense ambiguity, it would be unfair for there to be any sort of penalty for failing to hold a particular view (p. 248). So, soteriological exclusivists lose one of their main rationale for proselytising.

This is a very interesting type of pluralism. It is unique in that, unlike many types of pluralism, it has a focus on religious truth claims, but at the same time seems open enough to allow even an exclusivist in the doors. I can’t see any reason why a religious exclusivist who believes their own religion is correct for whatever reason, perhaps a religious experience, or simply faith, couldn’t look at the claims of epistemological pluralism and agree with them. They would have to admit, that if they didn’t have their religious experience or weren’t born into their faith, then they would be just as reasonable in belonging to another religion. And the idea that no penalty would be attached to doing so, even if they were wrong, should make them much more relaxed about the situation of people who are in these other religions. So, epistemological pluralism looks like a pluralism that even exclusivists could accept.
One problem I have with epistemological pluralism is that it seems to be sort of a defeatist attitude. It more or less implies, there is so much ambiguity here that we should just give up, and accept that everyone is justified in their view. Dialectical pluralism (see below), with its emphasis on finding a solution to the ambiguity, seems a much more positive position to take. Perhaps the two could be combined. You could be a reluctant epistemological pluralist in the short term but a long term dialectical pluralist.

Another issue is that, if there is so much ambiguity, is this a good reason to be a pluralist or is that more of a reason to be a naturalist? It seems the whole idea of rich ambiguity would sit perfectly within the naturalist camp. So, it may not actually be the asset\(^{44}\) that epistemological pluralism makes it out to be. And this problem dovetails into my greatest concern.

I think the biggest problem with epistemological pluralism is that it doesn’t answer the question that the problem of religious diversity raises. It doesn’t tell me why religious diversity exists in the first place. Why is there such rich ambiguity? The very reason we care about pluralism is that it attempts to answer this question. Ultimately, I think that to be a good pluralistic model, the model also needs to be a good theory of religion. It needs to deal with the existential question of religious diversity. If you can’t explain why all these different conflicting religions exist, then you probably should consider becoming a naturalist. For they have an excellent model that very well explains the diversity of religions. Thus epistemological pluralism is a decent model, especially if one considers it a temporary position. It offers a reasonable and I think appropriate response to religious difference. It is completely logical and should be quite acceptable to religious people. But, because it never deals with the really important issue of explaining religious diversity, it can’t be a great model.

\(^{44}\) Rich ambiguity is an asset in the sense that it is what allows one to be a pluralist.
Next I will look at a different version of epistemological pluralism called confessionalist pluralism.

3.10.1 **Confessionalist Pluralism** is the view that all religious truths are contextual and only apply within a single religious perspective. Absolute truths exist, but they are unknowable (Inbody 2002, pp. 208-209). Confessional means referring to one particular religious point of view and commitment (Peters 2007, p. 329). Exclusivists and inclusivists are typically referred to as confessionalists. So, the idea here is that you are trying to be pluralist but at the same time continuing to hold strong commitments to one religion. This is pluralism for exclusivists/inclusivists and is favoured by many Christian philosophers and theologians including Hans Küng, J.A. DeNoia, and Mark Heim (Min 1997, p. 588). Confessionalist pluralism is quite similar to relativistic pluralism (see below) but differs in that it accepts that absolute truths do exist. Combined with the claim that knowing these truths for sure is beyond the ability of any religion, puts it firmly in the epistemological pluralism camp.

However, this is not a pure epistemological pluralistic view and definitely deserves its own subcategory. In confessionalist pluralism there is no sense that the beliefs of other religions are in any way equal to those of the holder’s religion. Adherents from each religion are quite within their rights to believe that they are the superior religion and that when faced with any conflicting claims it is theirs which are true. Exclusivists and inclusivists would feel quite at home here.

Yet confessionalist pluralism manages to tiptoe along the borders of pluralism without quite falling into inclusivist or exclusivist territory. All claims that they make must be prefaced with, ‘from a religion X point of view’. And when
pressed, a confessionalist will always admit that they have no absolute truths and other religions may actually be right (Inbody 2002, pp. 209-212).

After analysing confessionalist pluralism one is left wondering if this isn’t more of a theological device than a sound philosophical theory. It seems like followers of this view just want to have their cake and eat it too. On the one hand, they want to keep acting like exclusivists/inclusivists, and claim that their religion is superior and true. But then, on the other hand, they realise that there are philosophical problems with those views and so really want to be pluralists, declaring that all religions are somehow true. To do this they gave up the idea of holding absolute claims. But then they can go about their days making all sorts of claims which certainly sound absolutist, yet are protected from criticism by insisting these claims are only contextualised claims within their religion.

If you really believe that humans cannot know any absolute truths, as they claim, then it seems much simpler and more logical to give up this whole contextualisation idea and act like pure epistemological pluralists who hold that all religions have an equal chance of being correct. Given such great doxastic uncertainty it would still be perfectly reasonable, as Alston (1993, p. 274) points out, to maintain your current religious practice. But you would have to dispense with all the absolutist sounding rhetoric. However, confessionalist pluralists seem unwilling to do this, hence the existence of this type of pluralism.

In a nutshell, confessionalist pluralism is a poor relation of the much more respectable epistemological pluralism. It makes a partial move towards offering an adequate response to religious diversity, but seems constrained by its religious roots to go the whole distance.
3.11 Dialectical Pluralism

Dialectical pluralism is the view that all religions are subject to the dialectic of history. It adopts the Hegelian notion that history is a process of differentiation, contradiction, and then sublation or reconciliation of those contradictions (Min 1997, pp. 588-589). Basically, no religion is an island. Each is continuously in contact with the other and the differences and conflicts that arise from this contact will shape and transform that religion in unique ways.

Dialectical pluralism is confessional in that it understands religion to be an existential commitment of its adherents. But it doesn’t relinquish its absolute claims nor try to contextualise its religious claims like confessionalist pluralism does. It remains exclusively committed to the particularities of an individual religion, but at the same time it doesn’t emphasise those particularities. Instead it is firmly focused on the historical process that creates cohesion between religions, reconciling their differences and transforming their hermeneutics. This dialectic of history puts pressure on religions to rethink old paradigms and revise existing conceptions. Dialectical pluralism strives to meet the practical challenge of living with diversity and the theoretical challenge of redefining oneself to make that possible (p. 588-590, 602).

Dialectical pluralism is a new approach to pluralism, created by Anselm Min in 1997. The idea here is that the only thing constant about religion is change. So, you can be an exclusivist, in fact you should an exclusivist because that is an existential part of you, but at the same time you need to recognise that this exclusivism is extremely tenuous, and the dialectic of history is always chipping away at it. But rather than fight that tendency and withdraw into an exclusivist fortress as many exclusivists do, dialectical pluralism encourages you to not only join the process of change, but relish it. Rise to the challenge of solving the theological differences that exist and join in solidarity with the religious other to battle these challenges together, and do so now, long before the challenges are actually resolved.
This is a nice friendly, palatable sort of pluralism. I can remain an exclusivist in almost every way, but at the same time walk hand in hand with religious others, jointly fighting the war against differences and each knowing we have the dialectic of history supporting us along the way. Could this really work? Or is this merely an idealistic fantasy?

It seems to me this whole idea is way too idealistic. First of all, does the dialectic of history actually work in the manner that this theory suggests? Does history really provide more solidarity over the long run, or is there only more change and different differences? I don’t purport to try and answer this question here. I can think of good arguments in both directions. It would make a very interesting research topic, but suffice to say here, it is far from clear that the dialectic of history has led humanity to have any fewer religious differences now than at various times in the past.

Second, why would you need, or even want, to hold on to your absolute claims if you were really convinced that the dialectic of history would cause them to inevitably change? On the other hand, if you were a true blooded exclusivist then you would be of the opinion that the dialectic of history would be causing a lot more change to the views of the religious other than it would for you. With this kind of an attitude how could you then ever engage in a productive form of interreligious dialogue to work out the differences? It seems to me that there is a huge tension here between holding onto your absolute claims and open-mindedly working to reconcile your differences.

Overall, I think the biggest problem with dialectical pluralism is the same as with epistemological pluralism. It never answers the existential question, why is there religious diversity? Without a good theory of religion in your pluralistic model, it doesn’t do enough explaining to be first rate. However dialectical pluralism is an interesting idea which may hold considerable potential. It goes beyond the passive resignation of epistemological pluralism by suggesting an active process which could
lead to an escape from the quagmire of rich ambiguity. Such a model deserves much more attention.

3.12 Alethic Pluralism

Alethic pluralism (All are True) is the view that all are true. As discussed above, this is the most important form of pluralism and in regards to the problem of religious diversity probably should be considered the only legitimate type of pluralism. Because of its importance there are many different varieties of alethic pluralism, all striving to somehow show that truth is contained in multiple religions, even when they contradict each other. I will cover three different types below.

3.12.1 Relativistic Pluralism is the view that religious truths are relative and there are no absolute truths. That is, religious claims can only be judged true or false relative to some conceptual scheme. There is no such thing as truth which is independent of any conceptual scheme. In the extreme, relativists believe that claims are so dependent upon their conceptual scheme that people operating within different schemes cannot even understand each other. The claims cannot be translated between conceptual schemes (Harrison 2007, p. 5-6).

Such philosophical relativism has been widely criticised as being incoherent. This view states that all claims are conceptual scheme dependent, yet to be correct, that relativism claim itself must be absolute and thus not conceptual scheme dependent (Harrison 2007, p. 7).

Furthermore, even if relativism was a viable concept, it doesn’t seem to solve any problems when applied to religious differences. Take one simple claim that Christianity makes; Jesus Christ was divine. It is difficult to see how relativism is going to dissuade anyone from thinking that the absolute truth or falsity of
that statement exists. First, one could argue that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all operate within the same conceptual scheme. All three of these religions know very well who Jesus Christ is and all make specific claims regarding the truth or falsity of that exact statement. It would be hard to argue that they are operating in different conceptual schemes when they are making specific claims about the same statement.

Secondly, even if they did operate in different conceptual schemes, one could easily argue that since all three religions are making specific claims about that statement, then in fact, that statement has been translated across conceptual schemes. If it wasn’t translatable across schemes, as the relativists claim, then why did two of the religions feel the need to make specific claims explicitly rejecting the statement? So, relativistic pluralism doesn’t hold much substance as a legitimate form of pluralism.

3.12.2 Internalist Pluralism is the view that religious claims can only be considered objectively true or false within the context of a conceptual scheme. Furthermore, the objects of religious claims do not even exist independently of their conceptual scheme says Victoria Harrison (2012, p. 78) who created internalist pluralism. A conceptual scheme is “a general system of concepts with which we organise our thoughts and perceptions” (Harrison 2008, p. 98).

At first glance internalist pluralism sounds so similar to relativistic pluralism it is difficult to know what the difference is. They even use the exact same terminology. However, the difference, according to Harrison (2012, p. 79), is that relativistic pluralism denies that any statement is objectively true, while

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45 It seems quite clear that the referent is the same in all three cases because in such debates the subject in question, Jesus, is the man found in the Christian New Testament, and the area of disagreement is just one of the many properties (divinity) the referent is said to possess.
internalist pluralism claims that statements can be objectively true within their conceptual scheme. Yet, in the above definition of relativistic pluralism Harrison says that these truths are relative to some conceptual scheme. So, one might ask, what is the difference between being true, relative to a conceptual scheme and true within a conceptual scheme? Harrison never makes this clear, but it appears that the difference is that the relativist would be aware of other claimed truths relative to different conceptual schemes, whereas the internalist pluralist would be more or less living inside a bubble, unaware of the existence of other truths within other conceptual schemes. This would appear to be supported by Harrison when she says, “reality – the totality of what exists – must depend upon one’s conceptual scheme” (p. 78). Thus, there is not only no awareness of truths external to one’s conceptual scheme, they do not even exist.

But, does the matter of whether one realises the existence of other truths, make internalist pluralism sufficiently different from relativistic pluralism that the same criticisms can’t be mounted against it? I think not. It seems to me that one could take the usual argument that relativistic pluralism is incoherent (described above) and make an analogous argument here. Internalist pluralism is itself a set of claims, and so they must also be trapped inside one’s conceptual scheme and thus can only be objectively true within that scheme and not apply to any other conceptual scheme.

Harrison (p. 83) seems sensitive to this criticism as she tries to escape the conceptual scheme straightjacket by arguing that internalist pluralism itself is actually a meta-conceptual scheme that identifies lower first order conceptual schemes within it. However, if shifting internalist pluralism up one level is successful in overcoming these problems, why isn’t relativism also considered a meta-conceptual scheme and viewed as a viable form of pluralism? It seems to me that even if you accept her idea about being a meta-conceptual scheme, the same logic applies one level up. Internalist pluralist claims are still not
absolute truths and remain confined within their own conceptual scheme. Being a level higher does mean that these claims can now apply to first-order conceptual schemes. However, internalist pluralism has no monopoly on potential meta-conceptual schemes, so surely alternatives must exist and these would have an equally valid case that they should apply to first-order conceptual schemes as well. Thus, it seems impossible to ever reach a broad acceptance of internalist pluralism while any one of a number of alternative meta-conceptual schemes could be occupied.

It also appears that my religious context related criticisms of relativistic pluralism above, are highly applicable. Specifically, given the historical lineages which many religions share, it is highly likely that groups of them will share the same conceptual scheme. Also, it seems extreme to claim that there could be no translation between conceptual schemes. Especially when one considers that, in all likelihood, the only people who will be attempting to translate between internal pluralist schemes will be professional theologians and philosophers who dedicate themselves to studying such issues.

And what about the whole idea of conceptual schemes? Does the role these play in internalist pluralism even make sense? Interestingly, Harrison bases her idea of internalist pluralism on Hilary Putnam’s theory of internal realism (p. 72). But Putnam pretty much abandoned that theory before Harrison had ever written about it. Putnam (1994, p. 463) writes, “Am I then giving up ‘internal realism’? . . . whether I am still, to some extent an ‘internal realist’ is, I guess, as unclear as how much I was including under that unhappy label.” Thus, Putnam thinks internal realism is highly questionable philosophy and at best he is only ascribes to such a position “to some extent”.

Examining another weakness in this theory, conceptual schemes are real mental frameworks, but what would make them so fundamental as to eliminate
the existence of objects beyond their boundaries? Harrison’s answer is that the meaning of any statement depends entirely upon the conceptual scheme from which it originated (2011, p. 82). These meanings cannot be grasped without an in depth understanding of the conceptual scheme they came from, and there can be no translation between conceptual schemes. Furthermore, the use of similar natural language by users of different conceptual schemes only serves to disguise the fact that their statements have completely different meanings (p. 81).

Harrison (p. 80) provides the following example to illustrate the idea.

consider the case of a Christian asserting that Jesus is the Son of God, and a Muslim replying: ‘No, he isn’t!’ They might not, in fact, be disagreeing, but merely talking past each other

First, it is troubling that the phrase *might not* is used. This implies that they also *might* be disagreeing rather than just talking past each other, in which case both statements can’t be true as internalist pluralism claims. From earlier descriptions of internalist pluralism it seemed clear that adherents of different religions always inhabited different conceptual schemes. Now it doesn’t seem as absolute. So, is this a pluralism that only applies some times for some people? If so, how can that serve as a general theory of religious differences?

Second, the crux of the idea of internalist pluralism is that different meanings will be attached to words, and these meanings are conceptual scheme dependant. So, a particular word with a particular meaning cannot even exist outside of its conceptual scheme. In the above example the phrase “the Son of God” is ambiguous even for Christians. But what if we replaced it with simply “divine”, so the claim reads “Jesus is divine”. Clearly the word “divine” should be understandable to anyone who can use a dictionary. The only remaining issue here is the word “Jesus”. Harrison (p. 80) deals with this in another
example saying the meaning of the statement ‘Jesus was born in Palestine’ “will crucially depend upon the significance attached to the name ‘Jesus’”. Granted Christians and Muslims will ascribe some different properties to the historical figure known as Jesus. But does the figure known as Jesus to the Muslims really cease to exist once one is removed from a Muslim conceptual scheme? Is it really so impossible for the both Christian and Muslim conceptual schemes to refer to the same object as internalist pluralism claims?

This idea seems completely unreasonable. Muslims actually accept large swaths of the Christian canon. They would be quite happy to take New Testament texts themselves and point to passages referring to Jesus and say, this person, this Jesus here, this is the one we are talking about. We don’t believe he is divine. How could a Christian, even one that is so isolated in their own Christian conceptual scheme that they are unaware of the existence of Muslims, not perfectly understand the meaning of the Muslim claim and be in complete disagreement with it? The whole idea of internalist pluralism seems to collapse when faced with many real life religious examples.

Finally, internalist pluralism, even if it were true, would likely not be very useful in solving religious disagreement. First, Harrison (2015, p. 267) paints this model as particularly laudable because it remains neutral with respect to religious and naturalistic interpretations of religion. However, this is more of a liability than an asset. Naturalists are not in need of a new theory of religion. They are already in possession of one which arguably best fits the facts. People of different religions are the ones who require a pluralistic model. This is why Hick (2004, p. xxv) said, “I am seeking a religious interpretation of religion”. Second, internalist pluralism is not the sort of simple intuitive concept that

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46 It is not simply the printed word they are pointing to here, but the entire narrative in the New Testament depicting who that word refers to. I believe this method of identification succeeds as a form of descriptions theory.
many laymen are going to adopt. It is complicated, rather abstract and probably requires philosophical training to even understand. Third, even if it was easily comprehended, very few religious people would accept it because it requires that they adjust their notion of objective truth to be confined to within only their own little conceptual bubble. Can you imagine trying to convince Christians that Jesus is true for them but not true for anyone else?

Overall the whole idea of internalist pluralism seems little different to relativistic pluralism and one might even conclude that it is inferior. After all, locking up truth claims inside little conceptual bubbles seems an extremely high price to pay simply to try and salvage some poor remnant of objective truth.

3.12.3 **Perspectival Pluralism** is the view that differences in religious claims are merely apparent and due do the different perspectives that each holds (Ruhmkorff 2013, p. 513). Ruhmkorff lists this as one of the three major types of pluralism, but clearly this is a type of alethic pluralism as it makes the claim that all the various religious claims are true and then attempts to explain how this can be the case. This sounds like a both a reasonable and popular form of pluralism. Min (2010, p. 60) even goes so far as to say that most types of pluralism accept some version of perspectivalism.47 Ruhmkorff (p. 513-518) declares that Hick, Harrison, Heim, and Byrne are all pespectivalists. But once you dig into the details of how each of these pluralists handle religious truth claims, it is obvious that none of them are really perspectivalists. I will consider

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47 This would be a problem for my classification if it were true. Because then perspectivalist pluralism would be either a strategy, like pragmatic pluralism, that different types of pluralism can employ, or it would be a higher level of pluralism itself, which would have all these other forms of pluralism as sub-types.
each of these examples now, but given these views have already been discussed in detail, I will be brief.

Beginning with Hick, his view is that the source of all religious believe is ineffable. So, religions are trying to comprehend something from different perspectives, but that is irrelevant because no perspective is going to allow them to comprehend the ineffable. The differing perspectives are not the source of the problem here. Furthermore, Hick does not accept the truth claims of any religion. In his model the differences are real, not apparent, and they are so because nearly all the claims made are literally false.

Harrison has the view that truth only exists within a conceptual scheme. Once again this has nothing to do with taking a different perspective. Once you are inside your conceptual scheme that is the only perspective possible.

Heim holds the view that there are multiple possible salvations. Thus the issue here isn’t that one truth claim is being viewed from multiple perspectives. There are numerous attainable outcomes here, and so all the claims can be true. There is no need to explain away differences.

Byrne’s theory doesn’t contemplate religious claims as being definitively true, but instead remains completely agnostic on them. Religious claims are only potentially true, and if one proves to actually be true then those claims incompatible to it are false. Therefore, there is no sense of perspectivalism taking place here either.

So, it is clear that none of those alleged to be perspectivalists actually are, but still, this is a decidedly prevalent view which is routinely expressed by the extraordinarily popular Hindu analogy of the Blind Men and the Elephant.

Although extremely prominent amongst naive pluralists, this analogy is beset with problems. In the story, the elephant represents the ultimate reality and the
blind men represent humans trying to comprehend what it is like. The ultimate reality is very big and complicated, so each person only experiences a small piece of the total, and in doing so, assumes that is what the whole is like. This causes many contradictions in their views to occur. It’s rough and leathery says one. No, it’s smooth and hard says another. And so on, with many different contradicting properties being claimed.

The problem with this analogy is that religions all claim to see the whole of ultimate reality. None of them claim to only see a small sliver of the truth. So to make the analogy work, you would have to accept that this meta-religious claim about the scope of what they can know is false. But once you have denied this most important meta-religious claim, what justification is there for believing that all the less significant first-order claims are true?

Another problem is that this analogy relies upon the blind men having different locations from which they are viewing the elephant. Whereas, it would seem difficult to justify why people would be viewing the ultimate reality from such diverse locations that they would arrive at completely different understandings of its nature. After all, human beings typically see all other phenomena in exactly the same manner.

A final problem is that what makes this analogy work is that the elephant consists of different parts. However it seems very unlikely that the ultimate reality is something that would consist of different parts.

In summary, despite perspectival pluralism being one of the most well-known forms of pluralism it suffers from serious logical inadequacies. Furthermore, there don’t even appear to be any notable philosophers who actually support this view. Perspectival pluralism can be relegated to the story books.
4. A NEW PLURALISM

We have now completed an assessment of eighteen different types of pluralism. We found that one was not a pluralism, one was only an attitudinal pluralism and several were known by multiple names. The following table summarises what we have covered.

**Table 7: Pluralisms Analysed**

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<tr>
<th>NOT PLURALISMS</th>
<th>Alternative Names</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pragmatic Pluralism</td>
<td>Effective Means, Soteriocentric</td>
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<td>PLURALISMS</td>
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<td><strong>Methodological Pluralisms</strong></td>
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<td>Deontological Pluralism</td>
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<td>Ontological Pluralism</td>
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<td>Panikkar’s Pluralism</td>
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<td>Process Theology</td>
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<td>Ethical Pluralism</td>
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<td>Soteriological Pluralism</td>
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<td>Differential Pluralism</td>
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<td>Core Pluralism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perennialism</td>
<td>Universalist, Hermetic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identist Pluralism</td>
<td>Monistic, Monocentric</td>
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<td>Transcendental Pluralism</td>
<td>Philosophical, Phenomenalist</td>
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<td>Byrne’s Pluralism</td>
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<td>Epistemological Pluralism</td>
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<td>Confessionalist Pluralism</td>
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<td>Dialectical Pluralism</td>
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<td>Alethic Pluralism</td>
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<td>Relativistic Pluralism</td>
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<td>Internalist Pluralism</td>
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<td>Perspectives Pluralism</td>
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The table above lists various types of pluralisms and their alternative names.
Recalling our discussions, differential pluralism was the first one that actually tried to tackle the problem of religious diversity, but it was found to be incoherent. Core pluralism couldn’t be supported by the religious data. Identist pluralism was also incoherent. Epistemological was a solid model, and dialectical pluralism even better, these being the only two models that conform to the definition of pluralism about truth claims worked out in Chapter 2. But neither addressed the existential problem of religious diversity. And finally alethic pluralism, which is the most important of the lot because it deals head on with the incompatible truth claims causing the problem, produced three completely incoherent models. This likely shows the enormity of the task of forming a good pluralistic model.

So where is a would-be pluralist to turn? There is nothing even palatable on offer. If I had to pick a least bad form of pluralism I would select dialectical pluralism, closely followed by Byrne’s pluralism. While dialectical pluralism is only a partial solution and Byrne’s pluralism is only partially coherent, at least both have the indispensable property of being reasonably acceptable to religious adherents. As I said earlier, if you don’t have this property, you fail; because you have lost your intended audience.

But pluralistic models should be able to do so much better than this. After carefully studying each of the pluralistic models on offer and drawing from these insights, I feel that it is possible to create a model that is acceptable to religious adherents, completely coherent, conforms to the definition of pluralism in Chapter 2, and offers a comprehensive solution. This is the model I shall now present.

Before I begin, I want to remind the reader that this is a model for religious adherents. I am in no way claiming that this model is superior to a naturalistic model. But if someone holds a priori assumptions which reject naturalism, this is their model. I
began this paper with the goal of producing a better pluralistic model that Hick\(^{48}\) and this remains the goal.

### 4.1 Initial Claims

I’ll begin by painting a broad picture of where we are headed with this model. This will entail some basic claims as follows.

1. Humans beings can and do access truth about the Ultimate.
   
   The Ultimate is not ineffable. If theistic\(^{49}\), it is simply unreasonable to believe that the Ultimate does not possess the power to transmit precise information to human beings. If non-theistic, an ineffable Ultimate would contradict the exacting claims made by most such religions. An ineffable Ultimate is also inconsistent with the religious data.\(^{50}\)

2. Many religious truth claims really are incompatible.
   
   We’ve considered numerous methods to try and avoid the conclusion that religious truth claims are incompatible, including redefining truth, relativising truths, considering different perspectives or conceptual schemes, and none of them were successful. Thus incompatible truth claims do exist and this means the claims of at least one religion must be false.

3. Religions are not equal in their success at truth acquisition.
   
   Religions are formed by humans and humans do not possess identical abilities to gather the truth in any other endeavour. So, there is no reason to suppose they do so in religion. Some religions might contain truths,

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\(^{48}\) I actually think that both Min (dialectical pluralism) and Byrne already have. So now I seek to improve upon these.

\(^{49}\) I am assuming that the Ultimate only provides truths and does not mislead human beings.

\(^{50}\) Specifically the detailed claims originating from revelation for theistic Ultimates, and contemplation for non-theistic Ultimates.
some might contain falsities. Some might contain many falsities, some might be complete fictions.

Removing these three items eliminates the source of most of the incoherency problems found in the other pluralist models. This achieves one of the major goals of my new model. However, these three claims make creating a pluralistic model difficult. But there is a way. Borrowing from epistemic pluralism:

4. There is rich ambiguity in religious claims.
   Even though many claims are wrong, we don’t know which ones they are. So, the only rational course of action is to be a pluralist about incompatible truth claims. The definition I derived in Chapter 2 fits perfectly; “[truths] from either religion might be true.”

And all this ambiguity can be used to insert the critical property of acceptability to religious adherents:

5. Given rich ambiguity it is rational to persist with your religion’s claims.
   As Alston rightly pointed out, in such an environment of doxastic uncertainty it is perfectly reasonable to continue holding the claims of your religion. And you should do this until you are given justification for doing otherwise.\footnote{However, you should do so with a large dose of epistemic humility.}

Using this principal of uncertainty is the only possible way that I can see to create a coherent pluralistic model that is acceptable to religious people. Essentially you have to find a way to allow two incompatible religious claims to both retain some sense of truth; a nearly impossible task which fells most pluralistic models. But uncertainty does the job. So, the second goal of our new pluralist model is now in place.
Thus far, what we have is epistemic pluralism Plus. Claim (4) is epistemic pluralism and it wouldn’t have a problem with claims (2), (3) and (5). Claim (1) is the Plus. Epistemic pluralism doesn’t make this claim but it should be agreeable to a religious version of this pluralism, and it is a highly attractive claim to all religious adherents.

Before moving on I want to address one issue with the first claim. This is a much stronger argument for a theistic Ultimate. However, similar logic could be applied to non-theistic religions. All non-theistic religions that I am aware of have theologies that include Gods (being divine but lessor than the Ultimate) transmitting information to human beings. So if this is the case, then I think the exact same arguments apply. But, should you be from a branch of a non-theistic religion such as Buddhism, which dismisses the existence of Gods\(^{52}\), you wouldn’t buy into these theistic type arguments, but you would still accept this first claim. This is because your view would be that one of the founders of your religion, through incredible skill and personal endeavour was able to access truth about the Ultimate.\(^{53}\) So the claim still stands, albeit in a weaker fashion, for the pure non-theist.

Returning to our new pluralism, what remains is to create a comprehensive solution. That involves producing an explanation for religious diversity; a theology of religions. The goal here is to produce a coherent theory that will supply credible answers to all those pernicious questions raised in Chapter 1.

One of them, the Source Problem, which questioned how the Ultimate could generate incorrect information, has already been answered by the first two claims of our new pluralistic model. Given claim (1) humans access truths about the Ultimate, and claim

\(^{52}\) Or the non-theistic religion could hold that these lessor God’s don’t impart knowledge about the Ultimate or care about the fate of humanity.

\(^{53}\) And there are believed to be many different ways of accessing this truth. For example, the Stoics believe that a commitment to reason will lead one to the Logos, but the Zen Buddhists hold that one needs to relinquish reason to come to know about the Buddha-nature, while the Neo-Confucians believe that living a life of harmony with the world is enough to ensure an awareness of the cosmic principal.
(2) many religious truths are incompatible, and thus are necessarily false, then there is only one conclusion that can be drawn. Many religious truths don’t originate from the Ultimate. So, the Source Problem has been addressed.

Next, I’ll attend to the three epistemic difficulties that the problem of religious diversity creates, namely the contingency problem, the epistemic peer problem, and the probabilistic problem. On the contingency problem, I have never seen a good religious explanation for the high correlation between religion and place of birth. I am fairly confident one does not exist. So, I think we all must agree that in this case, correlation does equal causation and place of birth is highly influential in us adopting the particular religion that we do. This is a huge problem for the exclusivist because if most religions are incorrect in their incompatible truth claims, then this doesn’t seem like a very good method for selecting one that is correct. However, no form of pluralism makes this incorrectness assertion. On the contrary, if all religions are somehow correct in their claims, as most pluralist agree, or if there is no discernible difference in correctness, as the epistemological pluralist holds, then it doesn’t matter what your method of selecting a religion is.

The epistemic peer problem is basically concerned with why these peer equals come to different conclusions. But in an environment of rich ambiguity, such as epistemological pluralism posits, it will be very difficult to choose between alternatives, so we would expect to see a variety of opinions formed.

The probabilistic problem asks, if there are so many different religions, what is the probability of yours being the correct one? But once again this is only a problem for

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54 A religious explanation would seek to unlink these two variables, so that place of birth does not cause religious selection.
55 Given the definition for pluralism about truth claims derived above, it is impossible to be a pluralist and assert this.
56 By correct one I mean that all of their important incompatible truth claims are correct.
an exclusivist who is claiming that there is but one correct religion. No version of pluralism makes this claim and thus simply being a pluralist eliminates this problem. Thus epistemological pluralism was able to deal with all these questions. But what it didn’t do is deal with the questions behind the questions. Why is there rich ambiguity in the first place, and why there are so many different religions? For this we need a good theology of religions and epistemological pluralism doesn’t provide one.

4.2 Naturalistic Pluralism

Almost all forms of pluralism that attempt to explain religious diversity use total or partial ineffability to do so. However this isn’t an option for this new type of pluralism because it was ruled out in its first claim. With this ruled out, there are no other religious options that I am aware of. From a religious point of view it seems difficult to even conceive of why a theistic Ultimate would want, or do anything, to cause religious diversity, which necessarily means significant numbers of religious adherents are terribly mistaken. Similarly, how could a non-theistic Ultimate which is accessible through some sort of mental effort lead to such rich diversity? Thus the only logical alternative is to use a naturalist explanation. This leads to claim six for the new pluralism.

6. Religious diversity has nothing to do with the Ultimate, but instead derives from naturalistic processes.

Sociological, cultural, and evolutionary processes create strong proclivities for human beings to manufacture religious claims. Some of

57 Since religions, as I am focusing on them here, are just sets of claims and the rich ambiguity is in regards of the claims, these are basically the same question.
58 Ontological pluralism uses ineffability of all of reality, rather than just the Ultimate. Perspectival pluralism is the only one that could be said to actually attempt to answer this question without relying on ineffability. But its solution would require there to be such a huge number of perspectives that it doesn’t seem viable.
these claims are even correct but are not sourced from the Ultimate. Others may be sourced from the Ultimate but are incorrect due to errors, corruptions, or mistranslations. Many more are simply fictions and fabrications. Collectively these factors account for all of religious diversity.

Is this a problem to use a naturalist explanation in a form of religious pluralism? I don’t think so. I’m not accepting naturalism here, I’m simply borrowing a few of its ideas. And I’m not saying that these ideas explain all of religion. I’m only proposing that they explain those items that weren’t transmitted by the Ultimate.\textsuperscript{59} It might sound strange that my “theology of religions” is so secular, but I’m sure that many an exclusivist holds similar views to justify why all the other religions are in error. It is actually a major advantage using a naturalist explanation because, as I mentioned earlier, it is an extremely plausible explanation, by far the best on offer. It is for this reason I have named the new pluralism \textbf{naturalistic pluralism}.

The final problem that needs to be dealt with, for theistic Ultimates, is the Unfairness Problem mentioned in Chapter 1. This is the most difficult problem to solve. If many religions are filled with errors, why didn’t the Ultimate do something about it? Why were these horribly mistaken religions allowed to expand and prosper for thousands of years? Given the incredible value that most religions ascribe to knowing the truth, it is illogical to believe that the Ultimate would withhold the truth from these fellow religions. It is inexcusable, bordering on evil to do so.

My conclusion on this front is that the only possible solution to the Unfairness problem is, the position one takes on incompatible truth claims between religions\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{59} The false side of an incompatible truth claim being the most important example.

\textsuperscript{60} I will confine this claim to those major religions which have stood the test of time and are influential in the lives of millions of people. It seems to me that if you choose to follow some small minority religion that has radical differences with the majors and is viewed by most as being filled with errors then the Absolute has less moral obligation to look after you.
simply cannot matter. Holding a false position on one of these truth claims is irrelevant to our religious flourishing; we are not disadvantaged in any way. McKim (2016, p. 248), when discussing epistemological pluralism, makes this exact point, which is in a negative sense, but I want to extend that to a positive sense as well. Thus, not only are there no penalties attached to holding an incorrect view, there are no significant lost rewards either.\textsuperscript{61}

To many religious exclusivists, this might seem like an extreme conclusion, but I think this is the only conclusion one can deduce. Given the Unfairness Problem, there are only a couple of possible options to choose from:

1. There is no Ultimate.

   This is ruled out by religious people’s a priori assumptions.

2. The Ultimate doesn’t care that some people are highly disadvantaged.

   I just don’t think the religious adherent can venture down this line of thought, especially when considering that the disadvantage is almost certainly caused by one’s place of birth, and thus of no fault of their own. If we are to start conceiving of the Ultimate as uncaring, then what is the purpose of religion? In that case it would hardly matter whether an Ultimate even existed or not.

3. The Ultimate cares but is incapable of acting.

   This is an even less likely alternative. Not only is this idea offensive to most conceptions of the Ultimate, when you consider the nature of the actions being required, simply the transmission of important information, the idea that the Ultimate is incapable of doing this is

\textsuperscript{61} Of course there would usually be some advantage in knowing the truth. But I’m claiming they are not material, life changing advantages that are of the extent which would cause the Ultimate to be viewed as uncaring for not rectifying the situation.
utterly implausible. News organisations can make nearly everyone on the planet aware of vitally important information today.

4. There are no material disadvantages to holding a false position within an incompatible religious truth claim.

This alternative could take a variety of different forms. It could be taken at face value and mean that the points which major religions differ upon are just not that important in the scheme of religions. Perhaps religions are meant to be only about one’s intentions, or one’s attempt to live an ethical life, or one’s achieving any number of virtues. Perhaps what is important is the quashing of one’s ego, or maybe it’s just the experience of living itself, the learning process of being.

It could also mean that the disadvantages are so minor, or for such relatively limited durations in the scheme of the universe that they don’t matter. It is also possible that it could mean that there are no net disadvantages. So even though there are disadvantages they are more than offset in some other way. In short, the potential reasons are probably too numerous to analyse. But for whatever reason, there are no major consequences for you being mistaken in an incompatible truth claim.

With the options laid out in a logical fashion like this, it seems obvious that the fourth alternative is the only rational choice. If any exclusivist is horrified by the idea that some of their most prized religious claims may not be that important, I challenge them to explain which other option they would choose.

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62 Note that pragmatic pluralism (expedient means), which you may recall is a strategy rather than a pluralism, could also be one of the many forms this alternative could take. Here the reason it is not important if you hold a false claim is because the claim still accomplishes its purpose.
Note that none of this line of reasoning will work for the pure non-theist, and in such a case this pluralist model should not include this claim. It is only being a theist that provides me extra information about some properties of the Ultimate that allows me to add this additional claim. Additionally, as indicated in Chapter 1, the pure non-theist has no Unfairness Problem, and thus doesn’t have any need for this claim.

Option four, the inconsequence option, will now form the seventh and final claim of this new type of pluralism. This inconsequential claim succeeds in diffusing the Unfairness Problem by attacking the fundamental premise that created the problem in the first place, that there is incredible value to knowing these truths. If I’m correct and there isn’t significant value, this is a profound conclusion with far reaching consequences.

First, it means that, in many cases, we need to turn on its head what we traditionally thought was vitally important about our religion. For the exclusivist, perhaps a more acceptable way of understanding this would be to adopt something like the ideas of representational inclusivism, where it’s not your religion, per se, that is important, but the broader concepts that it seeks to promote. Second, it means that there are no important disagreements to be had with other religions. The areas where we agree are likely of much more significance than those we differ upon. Finally, interreligious dialogue becomes something that is now actually feasible. In the past interreligious dialogue was like having a conversation about live heart donation. No one can live without the very things they are discussing giving up. But once all these divisive issues have had their non-negotiable tags removed, there is actually a lot to dialogue about. Furthermore, if one accepts that many of these incompatible truth claims are not essential, then even if they end up being true they might not be worth keeping in the religion’s foundational doctrines. Therefore, it may be possible for major religions to jettison what traditionally were considered sacrosanct claims. This would have the beneficial effect of leading to a general harmonisation of religions.
I actually think this inconsequential claim is much more ground breaking and carries with it greater implications than the previous naturalistic claim. I was tempted to name the new pluralism Inconsequentialist pluralism. However, it only applies to theistic religions. Since you can’t have a model of pluralism whose main claim and namesake doesn’t apply to a large portion of religions, this idea was quickly shelved in favour of Naturalistic pluralism. So this seventh claim must remain as a theistic addendum to the main model. However, I can’t emphasize enough how important it is.

Let’s now review what has been presented here. I started with epistemological pluralism which was a nice consistent, but not particularly enticing model. I then added a claim that humans can and do access truth from the Ultimate, which dramatically increased the model’s attractiveness to religious adherents. Their claims now have the potential to be completely correct and thus should be taken seriously. Next, I ruled out the ideas that incompatible truth claims could both be true and that religions are equally successful in truth acquisition. This, along with the earlier removal of ineffability, eliminates many possible sources of incoherence in the model. Then I did something that no other form of pluralism does, and adopted a naturalist explanation for the diversity of religions. With ineffability ruled out, this was the only available alternative, and it happens to carry the distinction of being the most plausible alternative as well. Because of this the new pluralism was named Naturalistic pluralism. Finally, by working to a solution for the Unfairness Problem, I came to the rather startling conclusion that there can be no material disadvantage to holding an incorrect position in an incompatible religious truth claim, and called this the inconsequential claim.

Here is how Naturalistic pluralism will work in practice. The religious adherent can live their lives thinking that they are correct in all of their incompatible truth claims. However, given the rich ambiguity that exists with religious truth claims, they must admit the possibility that the other religion may be the one that is correct in some of
those claims. They must also accept that the Ultimate had nothing to do with religious diversity and that the primary reason there are so many different religions and conflicting truth claims is that much of religion is a product of humanity’s naturalistic tendencies. Given this, it must be acknowledged that the odds are low that any religion has most of its incompatible truth claims correct.

Nevertheless, the theistic Ultimate has both the will and power to convey important truth claims to humankind and there is little doubt this has occurred. Likewise, knowledge of the non-theistic Ultimate is attainable by insightful thinkers around the world. Therefore, there can be hope that your religion derived many of its truths in this manner. Also, the more your truth claims agree with those of other major religions, the more likely they are to be correct. Finally, because the theistic Ultimate is powerful and caring, it is inconceivable that it wouldn’t have let other religions know about truths that are vitally important. So, if your religion contains truths that it perceives as essential, but other religions are not aware of them, then you must reluctantly admit that to preserve the Ultimate’s power or lovingness, they can’t be that essential.

So how does Naturalistic pluralism stack up against the competition? Let’s have a look. Table 8 outlines how the two best models, and Hick’s model, fair on a number of important criteria.63

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63 These criteria follow from the list of seven important criteria given at the beginning of Chapter 3. The first two criteria in this table relate to the “Relevance to the problem of religious diversity” in the earlier list. Criteria 3-5 in this table relate to the “Logical consistency and sound reasoning” in the earlier list. Criteria 6 and 8 exactly match the earlier criteria. Criteria 7 is a desirable addition to the “Acceptability to religious people” found in the earlier list.
Table 8: Pluralist Model Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Naturalistic</th>
<th>Dialectical</th>
<th>Byrne’s</th>
<th>Transcendental (Hick’s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Provides sound theory of religious diversity</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Provides solution to Unfairness Problem</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Eliminates dubious ineffability claims</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Eliminates questionable religious equality claims</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Overall coherency(^{64})</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Acceptable to Religious people</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Provides incentive for inter-religious dialogue</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{64}\) Naturalistic – no known issues. Dialectical – dialectical process of questionable coherency. Byrne – some similar issues to Transcendental. Hick – multiple coherency issues detailed above.
Based upon Table 8, Naturalistic pluralism fulfils its goal of being superior to all other models of pluralism. It is noticeably successful in providing a solution to the unfairness problem and is the only form of pluralism that provides a sound theory of religious diversity. However, this is a brand new model which has not undergone rigorous scrutiny, so it is possible there are problems with it which I have not recognised. But at this point it looks to be a very strong contender for being a leading, if not best, model of pluralism. I now present it to the philosophical community for comment.

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Legend: √ = Excellent  ○ = Satisfactory  × = Poor

8. Explains religious data\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{65} Naturalistic – has naturalistic backing. Dialectical – history not completely supportive of dialectical process. Byrne - can't explain detailed revelations. Hick – ditto.
This paper began with the goal of producing a superior religious model of pluralism. Earlier I had formed the opinion that none of the existing models of pluralism were very convincing, and the best ones had the unfortunate property of being completely unacceptable to the very audience they were created for – religious people. I felt an improvement was possible. But this paper had to cover a lot of ground to get there.

It started by producing a powerful and convincing argument about why the problem of religious diversity is an important, even existential problem for the religious adherent. It showed that this is a problem that demands a solution; a pluralist solution.

Next the paper described the Threefold Model and explained why there are so many difficulties in understanding what the components of this model, including pluralism even mean. It carefully detailed the inadequacies of the existing definitions and then painstakingly constructed a new set of definitions for these three components. These newly created definitions possess a clarity, symmetry, and coherency that is unmatched in the literature.

In the process of creating these improved definitions a novel approach to understanding the Threefold Model using pairs of binary functions was developed. This approach not only showed the inherent value of the Threefold Model, but could allow the Threefold Model to be applied to other similar logical problems.

Following this the paper classified and critically analysed eighteen different types of religious pluralism. This is by far the most comprehensive classification in the literature to date. The reader was given a sense as to how important each one of these pluralistic models is to solving the problem of religious diversity, as well as how they fare relative to each other.
Finally, utilising the tremendous understanding gained from conducting an analysis on so many different pluralistic models, this paper presented a new model called Naturalistic pluralism. While it is still early days, this model seems to have the hallmarks of being an extremely successful model across multiple criteria, thus fulfilling the initial goal this paper set out to achieve.


Neujahr, P 1995, Kant’s Idealism, Mercer University Press, Macon.


