# FROM STATEMENTS TO PARABLES: RETHINKING PLURALIST IDENTITIES

### GARTH L. HALLETT, S.J.

*The author observes that, while pluralist theologians and philosophers of religion have made claims asserting an identical, transcendent reality referred to by world religions, they have not noticed the fundamental problem facing such claims. Necessarily, abstract terms such as "reality" and "thing," of which the claims have need, lack criteria of sameness; and a term such as "identical" or "same," unlike descriptive expressions such as "wise" and "good," cannot be extended by analogy so as to remedy the lack. The claims are therefore empty. Apt parables would do better at expressing what the claims try to say.*

ACCORDING TO PETER BYRNE, "The doctrine that all major religious traditions refer to a common sacred, transcendent reality is at the heart of pluralism."[1] Others have expressed their pluralist positions similarly, in terms of identical reference. Thus John Hick, in the most characteristic version of his recent views, has stated his assumption "that the different world religions are referring, through their specific concepts of

GARTH L. HALLETT, S.J., received his Ph.D. from the Gregorian University and currently serves as dean of the College of Philosophy and Letters, Saint Louis University. His specializations in philosophy of language, ethics, and Wittgenstein are reflected in his most recent publications: *Linguistic Philosophy: The Central Story* (SUNY, forthcoming) and *Identity and Mystery in Themes of Christian Faith* (2005). Two new monographs are in process: "Theology within the Bounds of Language: A Methodological Tour" and "One God of All? Probing Pluralist Identities."

[1] Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995) 31; see also 12; and 78: "Reference can be made even if those who succeed in reference have no full or accurate idea of the defining properties of the referent"; and 191: "There is ground for saying that all major traditions designate one and the same sacred. A caveat to this claim must be entered in the case of certain strands of Buddhism which appear to deny that there is a positive reality denoted by words for the sacred." See also Byrne, "Ward on Revelation: Inclusivism or Pluralism?" in *Comparative Theology: Essays for Keith Ward*, ed. T. W. Bartel (London: SPCK, 2003) 13–23, at 19; and "It Is Not Reasonable to Believe That Only One Religion Is True," in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 201–10, at 204, 206.

the Gods and Absolutes, to the same ultimate Reality."[2] In like terms, Lynn de Silva has written that "man is related to a power or reality 'above' or 'beyond' himself, i.e., beyond his material life. This reality is referred to in different religions as Brahma, Allah, 'Buddha'—life, or even *Nirvāna*. Religion is therefore an expression of man's relation to the limits of his own existence. That ultimate frontier of human existence, in whichever way religions may conceive it, is what the word 'God' signifies."[3] Other pluralist formulations diverge somewhat from these, in ways italics can highlight. Alan Race holds that "the Transcendent reality which *is disclosed* through the language is ultimately one."[4] John V. Taylor states his belief "that the Ultimate Reality upon which the faith of all believers *is focused* in every religion is the same."[5] Others have spoken of "*a common ground and goal for all religions*,"[6] of "one ultimate reality revealing itself through all religions,"[7] of "many *manifestations of* the one ultimate mystery."[8] "There must be the same ultimate reality," we are told, "the same divine presence, the same fullness and emptiness—in Christian terms, the same God—animating all religions and providing the ultimate ground and goal of dialogue."[9] With further breadth and variety, the interfaith commonality is expressed in terms of experience ("different divine phenomena in terms of which the one divine noumenon is humanly experienced,"[10] "*what* is being experienced can well be the same ineffable reality"[11]), of perception ("different culturally focused perceptions of the one ultimate

---

[2] John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths* (London: SCM, 1995) 69. Sometimes Hick says that the various divine names refer to "the same ultimate Reality," sometimes that they refer to different "manifestations of the Real to humanity" (*Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* [New York: Palgrave, 2001] 191). For full discussion of this ambiguity in Hick, see Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001) 237–43.

[3] Lynn de Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979) 9.

[4] Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 1993) 147.

[5] John V. Taylor, "The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue," in *Christianity and Other Religions*, ed. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 212–33, at 232.

[6] Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985) 208, 209.

[7] Ibid. 209.                          [8] Ibid. 211.

[9] Ibid. 209. Briefly, for reasons that seem weak, Knitter has more recently called such claims into question. See Paul F. Knitter, "Searching for the Common Thread within Religions," *ReVision* 22.2 (1999) 20–26, at 22–23.

[10] John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985) 42.

[11] Knitter, *No Other Name?* 210.

divine reality"[12]), or of cognitive contact ("overlapping, limited, revisable attempts to achieve cognitive contact with a common sacred reality"[13]). Thus in William Rowe's summation: "According to religious pluralism, the profound differences among the chief objects of adoration in the great religious traditions are largely due to the different ways in which a single transcendent reality is experienced and conceived in human life."[14] Still more generally and indefinitely it might be said, with Endo Shusaku's priest in *Deep River*, "that God has many faces, and that he exists in all religions."[15] With this assertion of universal presence, not only religious pluralists but also "exclusivists" and "inclusivists" might agree.

The number and variety of these sample formulations signal the interest of the common thread running through them all: the different traditions' ground and source; the transcendent reality referred to, focused on, worshipped, and variously named; the reality conceived, revealed, manifested, experienced, responded to, made contact with, and present in them all is allegedly *one and the same*. Here, then, is a theme of broader, more general interest than Byrne's narrow formulation by itself might suggest, and the theme on which the present scrutiny will focus: the assertion of transcendent sameness that recurs in such "identist" forms of pluralism.[16]

A further commonality will sharpen the focus. Though the reasons and motives cited for and against these various proposals have been correspondingly diverse, debate has centered almost exclusively on the plausibility or truth of the claims rather than on the more basic question of their meaning or their lack thereof.[17] Clearly it makes sense to say that George W. Bush and the President of the United States are one and the same person, that London and the British capitol are one and the same city, or that the first Gospel and the Gospel of Matthew are one and the same book of the Bible. But what does it mean, there is reason to ask, to say that "Allah," "Vishnu," "Tao," "Brahman," "Yahweh," "God," "Nirvana," and other terms name the same sacred, transcendent reality?

I will first cite reasons for suggesting that, as they stand, such assertions

---

[12] Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* 78.

[13] Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism* 55.

[14] William Rowe, "Religious Pluralism," *Religious Studies* 35 (1999) 139–50, at 139.

[15] Endo Shusaku, *Deep River*, trans. Van C. Gessel (New York: New Directions, 1994) 122–23.

[16] See David Ray Griffin's distinction between "identist pluralism" and "differential pluralism" in "Religious Pluralism: Generic, Identist, and Deep," in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, ed. Griffin (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 3–38, at 24.

[17] For a representative sampling, see Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* 161.

lack meaning: analogy cannot save them as it can descriptive assertions. In response to the objections and misgivings that this verdict is sure to evoke, I will then suggest a way to recast the pluralistic assertions that makes better sense of them. Finally, I will briefly consider the significance of this shift of perspective.

Experience suggests the need for a further introductory observation. My attempts to treat these deep matters with clarity and care and to state my case as accurately as I can may stir unfortunate associations. Readers may be reminded of thinkers such as one of their number later described: "'What *exactly* do you mean?' was the phrase most frequently on our lips. If it appeared under cross-examination that you did not mean *exactly* anything, you lay under strong suspicion of meaning nothing whatever."[18] Such is not my bent. I do not urge that pluralists state their claims more exactly, but—strange as the suggestion may sound—I recommend that, for instance, apt parables replace the claims. And parables are hardly the favored medium of sticklers for precision.

## CRITIQUE

The truth of assertions of sameness or oneness is determined no differently than that of other statements: partly by the things described, partly by the language employed in describing them. However, in the language to which "same" and "one" belong (which in this respect is representative of many tongues), these words function differently than do terms such as, for instance, "blue" and "square." Shown a pair of objects—say, a pair of books—and asked to describe their color or shape, one can readily comply: it suffices to see their color or shape. Shown the same pair of objects and asked to say whether they are one or the same, one cannot reply without more ado. One must first know: one *what*? the same *what*? They may be a single set of two volumes, multiple copies of the same novel, or what have you. "Set," "volume," "novel," "copy," and the like—all such "sortals," as they are technically termed—have their own specific, varying criteria of individuation. Thus, the "same" river can dry up, then return, whereas the "same" trickle cannot. A club can change all its members over time and remain the "same club," whereas a book cannot change all its words and remain the "same book." Class by class, the criteria of sameness differ. Clearly, however, words such as "thing," "being," or "reality" (the term most favored above) lack such criteria. As they stand, therefore, the pluralist assertions of sameness or oneness look empty.

---

[18] John Maynard Keynes, on the climate at Cambridge, quoted by Albert William Levi, *Philosophy and the Modern World* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University, 1959) 449.

This type of objection may not be familiar to readers, so let me dwell on it a moment. An expression such as "three rivers" does two things: it counts and it describes. So, too, does the expression "a river"; it just changes the number. Such numbering is based on reasons so familiar that we may not notice them or notice their variation from class to class. Thus, whereas water can return to the same river bed after a dry spell and still count as the "same river," water cannot crest later on in the same spot and still count as the "same wave." It might be otherwise. Indeed, the criteria might conceivably be reversed: the "same river" might have to fill the river bed continuously, without temporal break, and water repeatedly cresting in the same place, no matter how discontinuously, might still count as the "same wave." However, for whatever intriguing reasons, such is not English usage. And the language spoken determines truth conditions for expressions used in that language.

Now, a river and a wave are both "things." So, clearly, neither continuity nor discontinuity figures among the criteria of sameness for things in general. To count as the same, some things, like waves, must be temporally continuous, whereas other things, like rivers, need not be. Some things, such as people, must be spatially continuous, whereas other things, such as societies, need not be. Yet all are "things." And so it is for any other criteria of sameness we might cite. No such criteria hold for all classes of things. Accordingly, the only sense it might have to say, for example, that Allah and Vishnu are the same thing would be that they satisfy the criteria of sameness for some more specific term. So the question returns: *what* term?

In first response, the thought may arise that perhaps expressions as general as "being" or "thing" have general, not specific, criteria of individuation. However, this suggestion would resemble saying that such expressions, being general, have their own descriptive content distinct from that of "blue," "strong," "human," "sublime," and the like. Asked to describe the nature of "things," we could give no answer. *What* things? Similarly, asked to indicate the criteria of individuation for things in general, we could not comply. We would still have to inquire: *What* things—books, novels, copies, clubs, corporations, cheetahs? Abstract, all-purpose criteria of individuation are as mythical as all-nature or no-nature things.

A remedy that might therefore suggest itself would be to restate the claims of sameness using a more definite word than "reality" or "being." Within the Western tradition, one might, for instance, try "god" or "spirit"; but these, too, are problematic. What criteria of individuation does the language reveal for gods or spirits, and how might such criteria conceivably arise, language-wide? For much of our history, notes Nicholas Lash, "gods" were simply what people worshipped. "In other words, the word 'god' worked rather like the way in which the word 'treasure' still does," and

there is no class of objects known as "treasures." "There is no use going into a supermarket," Lash observes, "and asking for six bananas, a loaf of bread, two packets of soap and three treasures."[19] Besides, pluralists have a reason for their choice of less definite expressions: thanks to their greater generality, "reality" and "being" more readily accommodate the full range of religious beliefs—Tao as well as Yahweh, Brahman as well as God, Vishnu as well as Nirvana. Such, then, are the terms pluralists favor and such are the terms they need.

Pluralists do not, however, leave the terms bare and unqualified. Byrne speaks of a *sacred*, *transcendent* reality. Others speak of an *ultimate*, *divine*, or *ineffable* reality common to the traditions. Modifiers add specificity and tighten the reference, much as more definite nouns might. Yet here too no answer to the issue of sameness can be discovered. For the modifiers do not furnish criteria of individuation, any more than in our simple samples. Shown a pair of objects (say, two books) and asked whether they are one or the same, we are not helped toward an answer by noting their color, size, shape, binding, or any other descriptive trait. Similarly, we are not helped toward a verdict of oneness or sameness by being told the sacredness, transcendence, or ineffability of the realities in question. The same question recurs: one what? the same what?

This response may seem too quick, for consider the following scenario. Returning from the seashore, someone reports seeing dozens of "little, circular, flat, whitish things" randomly scattered over the sand. To this report a hearer replies, "Those were sand dollars." Now, how did the person who did not know the term "sand dollar" or the criteria of sameness for sand dollars know that there were many of them scattered there on the sand and not, say, a single extended thing (like a single flock of birds or a single forest of trees)? The answer seems clear: the description "little, circular, flat, whitish thing" substituted for the missing concept, with its established criteria of sameness; and that description fitted the individual objects but not the randomly scattered collection. Whereas the collection was not, for instance, circular, the individual sand dollars were. So perhaps, in the absence of individuating criteria, descriptive traits can serve to individuate. What then about such modifiers as "sacred" and "transcendent" added to "reality" or "thing"? May they do what "circular" does in this imagined exchange?

The answer is again no. For "sacred" and "transcendent" resemble "whitish," not "circular." Whereas in our example "circular" tells in favor of multiplicity (since the objects are individually circular but do not form a

---

[19] Nicholas Lash, *Holiness, Speech, and Silence: Reflections on the Question of God* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2004) 10.

circle), "whitish" does not, but fits the sand dollars both collectively and individually. Each is whitish and all, collectively, are whitish. Similarly, "sacred" and "transcendent" characterize Allah, Vishnu, God, Brahman, and the rest both individually and collectively. Each is sacred or transcendent, and so are all, collectively. Thus these descriptive terms, too, pinpoint no referent, so furnish no reply to the question: the same *what*? many *what*?

Seeking an alternate source of individuation, we might consider context. For suppose the same pair of objects as above was presented to us but we were asked, "Are these the same book?" Without help from the verbal or nonverbal setting of the query, we might not know how to take the word "book"—whether as referring to the same work or to the same copy. In context, though, hearing "I have read the same book in several translations," we would know that the same work was meant; hearing "I can tell from the scratches on the binding that this is the same book," we would know that the same copy was meant. And we are familiar, unreflectively, with criteria of individuation for copies versus works. Similar clarification is not possible, however, with regard to Allah, Vishnu, Brahman, and the rest. Context can clarify by indicating the pertinent criteria of individuation—for instance, as above, those for a work or those for a copy—but such criteria are lacking for mere "things" or "realities." The problem with these terms is not their ambiguity but their generality.

Clutching at this clue, we may recall the role of analogy in transcending the specificity of familiar word usage. Customarily, "chess" refers to a game played by people with board and pieces; stretched by analogy, the same term may be applied, meaningfully and truthfully, to an activity conducted by computers without board or pieces. According to the "Principle of Relative Similarity," which this example illustrates and supports, it suffices that the term "chess" comes closer to the established use of words than would "poker," "tennis," "checkers," or any other rival, incompatible expression.[20] The like holds for "love," "know," "cause," "will," "desire," and many another term when applied transcendently, beyond all specificity, for instance, to God. For the truth of such an application, we need not know its truth or even be able to surmise how it is verified; it suffices that the use of the term resemble the established use of terms more closely than would the substitution of any rival, incompatible expression—that, for instance, the divine reality called loving resemble more closely things called loving than it does things called hostile, uncaring, or malevolent. So what

---

[20] See, e.g., Garth L. Hallett, *Language and Truth* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1988) chap. 7, for an earlier version of this principle; and Hallett, *A Middle Way to God* (New York: Oxford University, 2000) 13–17, for a revised version.

about "same" or "one"? Can the same solution work for these terms when they, too, are applied transcendently?

No, here is another dead end. For a language's criteria of individuation form no coherent cluster of traits—no flexible, variable family resemblance or the like—with which comparison might be made as in the case of "chess" so as to apply the test of similarity with established word use. They form no such cluster because the entities for which the criteria hold (pebbles, shoe-laces, frogs, sunsets, melodies, microbes, etc.) are so varied and because the criteria vary accordingly, class by class. The coherence of the concepts "same" and "one" derives, not from their relative descriptive constancy, but from their characteristic dependence on other terms and those terms' respective criteria of individuation. But such supporting terms and criteria are entirely lacking in talk about "things" or "realities" in general. No privileged, divine language remedies this lack, nor does any pluralist theory suppose that it does. If there are to be criteria of sameness or individuation, our human languages will have to supply them, and they furnish none for such terms as "being," "thing," and "reality."

Why, then, if this problem for pluralists' assertions of sameness is genuine, have they so largely ignored it? If they have ignored it, can the problem be real? Why does this intrusion of linguistic considerations sound so alien to current discussion of pluralist interfaith identities?

One reason, it seems, is the general impression that the realms of mystery that pluralists explore lie beyond the reach of precise linguistic discrimination. All this talk about "individuating criteria" is far too neat. To be realistic, theology must respect its subject matter. To this sort of reaction, briefly anticipated in my introduction, I can respond a bit more fully now. To judge from comments I have received, the following three points may be germane. First, pluralists themselves do not entirely despair of language but venture claims, in language, about the transcendent. A completely apophatic approach to mystery would put theology out of business. Second, my complaint is not that pluralists speak imprecisely about the transcendent, but that no criteria of sameness are available in the languages they speak that might allow them to state their theses more precisely. The theses are not merely vague; they are empty. Third, contrary to the impression I have cited, my aim is not to downplay mystery but to stress it. Pluralist accounts take too little note of the limits of language in dealing with the transcendent.

A second explanation for neglect of the problem I have raised may be the attitude, still widespread, that John Mackie voiced: "This is the basic problem for linguistic philosophy, to decide whether it is concerned with grammar or metaphysics, with language or the world. And if it is to tell us something about the world, on what evidence or on what arguments will its conclusions rest? If we want to learn about the world, no strictly linguistic

evidence will be at all conclusive."[21] To be sure, but the linguistic evidence may be conclusive when joined with the nonlinguistic. When, for example, drops of water are falling from clouds, the drops bear no identifying labels; but the English language may determine that the drops are "rain" and not "hail," "sleet," or "snow." The issue Mackie slighted is this: to what extent should language be recognized, in philosophy and elsewhere, as a determinant of meaning and truth and therefore of what we should say? Should pluralists, for example, speak much about sameness but attend little to the language they speak and its criteria of sameness?

It is clear why some might do so. Our languages furnish rough but effective criteria of individuation for most of the class nouns we employ, on most occasions. We know how to distinguish one novel from another, one river from another, one person from another, and so forth. Since this knowledge is unreflective, we have little awareness of how differently sameness is determined class by class. The same, we may assume, is simply the same, as blue is blue and hot is hot. So when we shift from talk of books, rivers, persons, and the like to metaphysical discussion of realities, beings, things, substances, and the like, we may spot no problem. There, too, we can speak of sameness or oneness and mean what we always do. There in transcendent realms of mystery, the truth of what we say may be problematic, but not its sense. So, without any criteria to guide us, we may start to flounder. We may cite whatever arguments suggest themselves for conclusions of whose sense we have no clear understanding.

In illustration, consider Patrick Shaw's pertinent sampling with regard to the sameness of gods:

So far, then, several criteria have been encountered which might be employed, severally or singly, for identifying a god:

(1) Sphere of influence (the god of war, the god of the Athenian state, the god of the entire universe);
(2) Status with regard to, or relation with, other gods (the chief of the gods, the messenger of the gods);
(3) Connection of name (as, for instance, Mars and Ares, Jupiter and Zeus);
(4) The qualities the god possesses (benevolence, omnipotence, cruelty, lasciviousness).
(5) The psychological impulse causing the (erroneous) belief in a god.[22]

"Roughly speaking," Shaw continues, "Frazer appears to regard the first three [criteria] as relevant, Hegel probably requires the first four, Blackburn variously suggests (3) and (5)." Shaw contrasts these viewpoints of

---

[21] J. L. Mackie, *Contemporary Linguistic Philosophy—Its Strength and Its Weakness* (Dunedin, New Zealand: University of Otago, 1956) 17.
[22] Patrick Shaw, "On Worshipping the Same God," *Religious Studies* 28 (1992) 511–32, at 516.

nonbelievers with those of believers, and concludes: "The important point is that the epistemology of a religion—how it conceives belief or knowledge about religion to be attained, and how it explains disagreement—will play a crucial part in determining when its adherents will judge that others are worshipping the same god."[23] Shaw's perspective, like theirs, is epistemological. The linguistic, criterial question does not surface in his discussion, in the thinkers he cites, or in his agenda for further inquiry.

This, then, is what linguistic inattentiveness looks like and this is how it may arise. Were this the whole story, there would be no reason to harbor misgivings about the preceding critique and to wonder whether such inattentiveness is perhaps justified, for some unnoticed, unspecified reason. However, there is more to the story, for some pluralists do attend to language. Why, then, do they ignore linguistic criteria of individuation?

Hick holds interest in this regard. Distinguishing between the literal and the metaphorical application of terms, he takes no account of analogical extensions such as I have noted, in virtue of relative similarity, and he therefore draws no distinction, as I have, between descriptive terms ("love," "know," "will," etc.), which permit such extension, and individuating terms ("one," "same," "single," etc.), which do not. Accordingly, he bundles all these expressions together—the descriptive and the individuating—and denies, without distinction, their applicability to the transcendent Real. The emptiness I discern in "one," "same," and the like, he finds in all: the Real in itself lies so far beyond human understanding that "it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating."[24]

The relevance of individuating criteria may similarly escape the notice of those who, accepting analogy, reject Hick's blanket pessimistic appraisal. For analogy is often analyzed simply in terms of "open texture" or of partial resemblance, somewhere between univocity and equivocity, with the kind and degree of resemblance left unspecified. In particular, the role of language in determining the kind and degree is seldom clarified.[25] But without such clarification, the crucial difference between descriptive and individuating expressions is not likely to emerge. As Hick lists "one" indiscriminately with "person," "conscious," "purposive," and the rest, so may those who, unlike Hick, make room for analogy. Without giving much thought to the question, they may assume that whatever account legiti-

---

[23] Ibid. 526.

[24] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University, 2004) 350. See Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths* 60.

[25] See Hallett, *Language and Truth* 180–82.

mizes the theological extension of other terms covers "one," too. Why not? They are open; so is it. What resemblance can do for them, resemblance can do for it. All are therefore available.

These reflections further address the misgivings that might arise from authors' silence about individuating criteria in a discussion where such criteria seem so relevant. They are indeed pertinent; but no such principle as that of relative similarity figures at all prominently in contemporary theological thinking, and no such principle, therefore, draws attention to their relevance.

Though pluralist theologians show little awareness of the problem I have been urging, those familiar with the pertinent philosophical literature might come to their defense. There is only one kind of identity, many have insisted, and that is a thing's identity with itself. Sameness does not differ from class to class, as I have been suggesting. This defense would confuse two different questions. It may be that a thing—whether book, river, person, plant, or planet—can only be identical with itself. This metaphysical dogma, as I would call it, does not here concern me. I am interested in what makes the thing *a* thing—*a* book, *a* river, *a* person, *a* plant, *a* planet, or whatever. The answer to this question varies from class to class.

David Wiggins's explication of sortal dependency might appear to offer a final glimmer of hope for pluralist claims of sameness. For he writes: "All that a man who says that *a* is *b* commits himself to is that *a* and *b* are the same *something*—a self-sufficient and self-standing claim."[26] There just need to be individuating criteria, known or unknown to the speaker, which could be applied to *a* and *b*. I would note, first, that even were this true, what the man thus nebulously commits himself to does not confer sense on what he says. If, for instance, he says of the books in his hands, "These are the same," the existence of individuating criteria for books and for copies does not indicate which claim (same book or same copy) is intended, if either. Furthermore, in this case individuating criteria do at least exist that might verify his claim—criteria that his hearers doubtless know and that the principle of charity might suggest they apply—whereas for terms as general as "reality" and "thing" there are no such criteria. Not in English or in any other language.

Still, misgivings persist. Granted, the full variety of major religious beliefs may pose a plausible target for the foregoing critique. What does it mean to say, for example, with Byrne and others, that "all major religious traditions refer to a common sacred, transcendent reality"? However, if valid, the same sort of critique might seem to hold not only for this more varied constellation drawn from East and West but also for a narrower,

---

[26] Ibid. 48.

monotheistic selection—for Yahweh, God, and Allah—indeed for any one of these three alone. Yet, despite notable variations in the beliefs of Christians and despite still more notable differences in the beliefs of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, surely it makes sense to assert or suggest that they all worship the same divinity—the one Jews call Yahweh, the one Christians call God, and the one Muslims call Allah. Surely the Christian profession "I believe in one God" is not an empty declaration. The moment has come for second thoughts.

## SYNTHESIS

A solution often proposed when problems arise from natural languages and their familiar word uses is to fashion clearer, sharper definitions for any fuzzy or ambiguous terms. Granted, things by themselves do not make our statements true. Granted, our natural languages furnish no criteria of individuation for "things," "beings," "realities," "substances," or "gods." But what such languages lack perhaps we can supply. Perhaps we can give clarity and firmness to claims of sameness by stating criteria of sameness for whatever term we wish to use that lacks them—for instance, "god." Though pluralists, not noting the problem of individuating criteria, have made no move in this direction, it may not be too late to remedy the omission. However, what criteria of individuation might we reasonably propose for transcendent referents such as pluralists cite?

To see one reason why we spot no such criteria in our language and can proffer none on our own, consider the familiar tale of the elephant palpated by several blind men.[27] One feels the head, another an ear, another a tusk, another the tail. So they give very different descriptions of what we, the sighted, know to be a single elephant. Suppose, though, that the blind men get together and surmise, "Perhaps, despite all the differences and apparent contradictions in our accounts, we are all feeling the same thing." With no more indication than the word "thing" and their tactile sensations to go by, the same thing might be the same elephant, the same elephant family, the same elephant herd, the same elephant population, the same collection of elephant parts, the same temporal slice of an elephant, of a herd, or of an elephant population, and so forth. Indeed, the possibilities are endless. For there are no criteria of sameness for mere "things," and the possibilities I have suggested reflect our knowledge, not theirs, of elephants, herds, elephant populations, and the rest. The blind men, presum-

---

[27] Another, complementary reason might start with Wittgenstein's saying, "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments" (*Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Blackwell, 1958] §242).

ably, know nothing about elephants. They are in the dark. Being in the dark, not only semantically but also ontologically, they can neither report criteria of sameness for the common thing they surmise nor stipulate appropriate criteria. They cannot surmise, for example, any such handy criteria as we unreflectively apply when we discriminate between individual elephants, between individual elephants and elephant herds, or between individual elephants and collections of elephant parts. All such distinctions lie beyond their ken.

So it is, analogously, for us. To individuate between gods or other transcendent realities, we would have to know more about those realities. Mere definitions cannot dissipate our darkness. However, I cite this tale not merely in critique, but because it suggests an alternate approach to the one I have found wanting. Instead of asserting that the transcendent referents of the major faith traditions are all the same reality, we may take a cue from the Principle of Relative Similarity: in like fashion we may suggest, for example, that the relationship between the faith traditions resembles more closely that between several blind men feeling a single elephant than it does the relationship between several blind men feeling parts of different elephants in the same herd, in the same elephant population, or in the same museum collection of elephant parts. A parable may thus replace the varied, repeated assertions of sameness. For in the absence of criteria of individuation, the assertions are empty, whereas the parable is not.

Or rather, to complete the dialectic, the parable suggests what sort of content the assertions of sameness can be recognized as having or can be given. Though semantically void, the assertions may not be psychologically empty. Fuzzy images, indefinite phantasms flitting through our minds, may accompany the words, especially if the assertions are challenged. Told that claims of transcendent sameness are empty, we may call up a phantom thing, imagine that one thing being experienced or mentally targeted by multiple thoughts or thinkers, and dismiss linguistic objections as sophisticated obfuscation of the obvious. Where is the problem? Viewed in the way I have suggested, the parable of the elephant can serve to articulate and give intelligible form to vague thoughts such as these.

We know what the blind men are feeling; they do not. We know criteria of individuation for such things; they do not. We know that, by these criteria, what they are feeling is one and the same elephant; they do not. We can contrast one and the same elephant with one and the same elephant herd, elephant population, or collection of elephant parts; they cannot. Yet, with sharing and reflection, they might form some educated surmises in the manner David Krieger has suggested:

What if the blind men were able and willing to listen to one another and to perceive that they all had, indeed, experienced some truth? What if, instead of condemning each other, each took the other by the hand and led him to that point where he had

touched the elephant? Each would then see that the description which the other had given was justified. It would turn out that the elephant really was as each had described it. All could now admit this. For each would find not only his own description of the elephant confirmed, but also *completed* through the description of the other.[28]

In some such way as this, I suggest, we can make best sense of Byrne's pluralist hypothesis that all the world's major religions refer to the same transcendent reality. For notice that Krieger here says nothing about *sameness*.

The parable might tempt us to do so; for, like most comparisons, it is not apt in all respects. Filling it out, we might plausibly imagine that the blind men know some language and some linguistic criteria of individuation, just not the ones we know for visible objects such as elephants. So their surmises might become semantic as well as ontological. That is, they might surmise that sighted people have a word for the sort of thing that they, the blind, can only nonvisually surmise. And they might further conjecture that by the criteria of individuation for that sort of thing, what they are palpating counts as one and the same thing of that kind. At this point, however, the parallel with our theological situation breaks down. We, in our darkness, may be ontologically blind, but we are not semantically deprived. No transcendent facts of language lie beyond our ken. Figuratively speaking, transcendent elephants there may be, but not unknown words for such creatures or unknown criteria determining their sameness or difference, oneness or multiplicity. No Platonic realm of Forms remains to be intuited or recollected to tell us what we should say. The parable, therefore, or some variant, is irreplaceable; this is the best we can do.

Whereas the parable might conceivably be apt, for at least some interfaith comparisons (I leave that for fuller consideration elsewhere[29]) the indiscriminate extension of "same" is not apt. For, though "same" may appear more definite than the fuzzy parable, the reverse is in fact the case. Two people feeling different parts of a single, living elephant might be said to feel the "same thing," but so also might two people feeling different samples in a single collection of elephant parts. That too could count as the "same thing." Given these alternative examples of sameness (same elephant versus same collection), which would pluralists choose as approximating more closely, though still distantly, what they wish to say? Making a choice (no doubt in favor of the elephant), they would move beyond the

---

[28] David Krieger, *The New Universalism: Foundations for a Global Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991) 2.

[29] Two chapters of my recently completed *Theology within the Bounds of Language: A Methodological Tour* complement the present discussion, and in a work underway I plan to elaborate my treatment of the same topic.

empty indefiniteness of assertions of sameness. "This," they might say, "comes closer to what we have in mind."

Such a move can be made with more assurance for a selection of mono-theistic religions than for the full panoply of world faiths, with all their striking diversity. Surely, I suggested, it makes sense to assert that at least Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same divinity. Here, I now propose, is how such a claim can be made sense of: in the absence of criteria of identity for divinities, gods, and the like, the assertion can be viewed as convenient, popular shorthand for a suitable parable or comparison. Jesus liked the comparison with a loving human parent—the same for Muslims, Christians, Jews, and all humankind.

## SIGNIFICANCE

If the preceding critique has validity, one implication seems clear: plu-ralists should drop their too-facile assertions of sameness. Less evident but of greater interest than this negative result is how the motives and reasons behind the assertions are affected by the recommended shift from state-ments of sameness to elucidation through parables or models. To what extent can the arguments adduced for the statements support the parables that replace them? To what extent can the parables satisfy the motives behind the statements? How do things look from this new perspective?

Given the number, variety, and complexity of the arguments and motives in question, I can only examine a sampling. Thus, starting with the argu-ments, consider this one from Hick: "My reason to assume that the differ-ent world religions are referring, through their specific concepts of the Gods and Absolutes, to the same ultimate Reality is the striking similarity of the transformed human state described within the different traditions as saved, redeemed, enlightened, wise, awakened, liberated. This similarity strongly suggests a common source of salvific transformation."[30] These "specific concepts," especially when faithfully, fully spelled out as in each of the traditions, may evoke the blind men's varied descriptions of the head, ear, tusk, and tail. And nothing in their descriptions might differ if these parts belonged to different elephants, indeed to a whole herd of elephants. Thus Hick acknowledges:

we cannot rule out *a priori* the possibility that there is nothing more ultimate than a co-existing plurality of personal deities, together with Brahman, the Tao, the Dharmakaya, Sunyata, and so on. But the problem with this picture is the difficulty of spelling out the relationship between these different realities.[31]

To be sure. And we cannot consult the parable (an elephant, no less!) to

[30] Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths* 69.
[31] Ibid. 69–70.

surmise what the relationship might be. But it does suggest how Hick might be answered when he continues:

I suppose it's possible to think that Allah presides over Muslim countries, the Holy Trinity over Christian countries, Vishnu and Shiva over different parts of India, Adonai over Israel—but what about the still occupied territories?—and so on. But could one really make sense of this kind of polytheism, particularly today when people of different faiths are all mixed up together in so many areas?[32]

Perhaps not, or not very readily; but the like holds for our parable. Different elephants might be differently felt by different people as they and the people move about: head, tusks, ears, tail, legs, rump, toenails—now these now those, of this or that elephant—might be felt on this or that occasion, by this or that person, in this or that condition of sobriety, distraction, exaltation, or intoxication. We can imagine all sorts of patterns emerging, well beyond the blind men's ability to sort out or make sense of.

Hick has noted how such comparisons might be understood: "The suggestion is not that the different encounters with the divine which lie at the basis of the great religious traditions are responses to different *parts* of the divine. They are encounters from different historical and cultural standpoints with the same infinite divine reality and as such they lead to differently focused awareness of the reality."[33] Hick's reference to the "same infinite reality" comes naturally in this comparison, but there is no need to take this leap into the semantic void; the parable is sufficiently suggestive as it stands—suggestive of what Hick has in mind when he makes his claim of sameness and also of the weakness of his argument for the claim.

However, the chief point of the preceding critique is not the felicity of this particular parable, but the infelicity of the approach such parables or models can replace. With regard to Hick and his sample argument we can see that the alternative approach I have recommended does three things: (1) It eliminates the transcendent application of "one," "single," "same," and the like, and arguments for and against transcendent oneness, singularity, or sameness such as Hick's. (2) It eliminates the incoherence of thus applying the expressions, then declaring them inapplicable, as Hick does. If they are inapplicable, either for his reason (the transcendence of the Real) or mine (lack of individuating criteria), they should not be applied. (3) It eliminates their application without, however, as in Hick's case, involving other, descriptive expressions in the same semantic holocaust. Analogy can stretch the descriptive expressions ("good," "wise," "powerful," etc.), but

[32] Ibid. 70.
[33] John Hick, "Do All Religions Worship the Same God?" in *Questions about God*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and David Shatz (New York: Oxford University, 2002) 153–70, at 162.

it cannot supply criteria of individuation for the nondescriptive expressions, permitting similar transcendent stretching.

These adjustments do not suggest how Hick's argument might be reformulated, avoiding both the premises and the conclusion that talk about sameness. They just suggest how differently any substitute conclusion would have to be expressed and how differently, therefore, a demonstration would have to proceed. It would have to recommend a parable or distant comparison, by way of analogy, rather than argue for an assertion of sameness or identity.

The elephant parable proves equally relevant with regard to pluralist motivation as distinct from pluralist argumentation for assertions of sameness. Here, in illustration, I again draw on Hick, who states the desirable implications he perceives in the thesis of transcendent sameness:

When I say in a summarizing slogan that God has many names, I mean that the Eternal One is perceived within different human cultures under different forms, both personal and non-personal, and that from these different perceptions arise the religious ways of life which we call the great world faiths. The practical upshot of this thesis is that people of the different religious traditions are free to see one another as friends rather than as enemies or rivals. We are members of different households of faith, but households each of which has some precious and distinctive contact with the Eternal One, which others can perhaps learn to share.[34]

There can be little doubt that, rhetorically, such reference to a common, transcendent focus of faith is more effective in eliciting this desirable sense of fellowship than any parable about a palpated pachyderm would be. Still, rhetoric aside, what besides the singular reference to "the Eternal One" favors such a reaction? The elephant parable can serve a similar purpose without any claim of sameness. Indeed, the parable can do better (albeit imperfectly) what the claim cannot do at all, once its emptiness is perceived. The claim may permit us, by analogy, to imagine several people feeling different parts of a single elephant, but it permits us equally well to imagine them feeling such parts in a single herd, a single elephant population, a single anatomical collection, a single display of hunting trophies, or what have you. What oneness! What fellowship!

I have offered a mere sampling to illustrate concretely what might already be surmised. Rejecting claims of sameness makes a difference. Replacing them with parables, comparisons, or models may mitigate the difference. The whole exercise is motivated by the belief that, whatever their merits, pluralist positions of the kind cited at the start are important but require reformulation before they can be assessed. Their appeal cannot be weakened in the process if, as I have argued, they do not make evident sense as presently formulated.

---

[34] John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 59.