

WHAT'S THE USE OF EXCLUSIVISM?

MARA BRECHT

The author examines the unique contributions of exclusivism to the Christian theological discussion of religious diversity. Exclusivist theologians develop epistemologically oriented approaches while inclusivist and pluralist theologians tend to work from soteriological orientations. The epistemological orientation leads exclusivists to regard religions as foundational for truth claims and believers as their agents. As such, exclusivists are more able to address how ordinary believers encounter and understand religious diversity, whereas inclusivists and pluralists are less able to do this.

THEOLOGIANs CHARACTERISTICALLY DIVIDE MODELS for Christian theological engagement with religious diversity into three categories: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.¹ As Diana Eck argues, American immigration patterns of the late 20th century “have expanded the diversity of our religious

MARA BRECHT received her Ph.D. from Fordham University and is currently assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Saint Norbert College, De Pere, Wisconsin. Specializing in theologies of religious pluralism, interreligious dialogue, and religious epistemology, she has recently published “Meeting the Challenge of Conflicting Religious Belief: A Naturalized Epistemological Approach to Interreligious Dialogue,” *Heythrop Journal* 51.5 (2010); and “The Humanity of Christ: Jacques Dupuis’ Christology and Religious Pluralism,” *Horizons* 35.1 (2008). Under review is a monograph entitled “Taking the Epistemology of Interreligious Dialogue Seriously.”

¹ While the tripartite classification is standard for grouping types of theologies of religious pluralism, it is also contested. Many scholars question the usefulness of such a classification system and/or envision ways to divide up theologies of religious pluralism. Gavin D’Costa sees the classic exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism paradigm as frustrating rather than as advancing the conversation. He rejects the threefold typology on the grounds that it “fails to deliver on the question of the unbeliever in precise enough ways” and that “the terminology conceals the fact that all the different positions are exclusive in a very proper technical sense.” He offers instead a sevenfold paradigm with which to classify responses to religious diversity. See his *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2009) 34–35. Paul Hedges states that the threefold typology can be dangerous if it is seen as something that can “either tell us all we need to know about any one person’s theology . . . or else see it as something to direct the encounter with those of other religions” (*Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* [London: SCM, 2010] 20).

lives dramatically, exponentially.”² Such a dramatic and exponential expansion has reinvigorated discussion of these models for engagement, leading scholars to reconsider how and to what end Christians ought to develop greater sensitivity to the beliefs, practices, and lives of diverse, non-Christian religious people. As Eck puts it, “We will all need to know more than we do about one another and to listen for new ways in which new Americans articulate the ‘we.’” Knowing more about religious others has not only the social consequences Eck calls attention to, but theological consequences as well. Just as we must strive to know more about one another, we must also strive to develop theologies of religions that articulate the intrinsic worth of non-Christian religious traditions. And, in turn, we must strive to censure theological responses to religious diversity that emphatically and unthinkingly uphold the uniqueness of Christianity—in short, exclusivism—or so the standard view goes.

My purpose here is to reconsider exclusivism and rehabilitate its contribution to the Christian theological discussion of religious diversity, even given our radically plural religious landscape. I examine and explicate three contemporary exclusivist arguments in order to argue that these positions—fixed within the traditional tripartite classification and subject to powerful criticisms though they may be—are pushing the Christian theological conversation in a new direction. This direction, I maintain in my first section, is precisely where the conversation on the theology of religions must head if it is to be relevant and compelling to the everyday experiences of the people to whom these conversations are directed, those who occupy a religiously diverse world.

My second section argues that Paul Griffiths, Harold Netland, and Gavin D’Costa advance a new form of exclusivism that may be called—to borrow a phrase used to characterize developments in feminist theory—a “new wave” of exclusivism. The new exclusivists are informed by principles from studies in philosophy of religion and employ a “bottom up” approach to religious diversity by placing greater emphasis on religious belief and practice. Through their collective focus on religious believers’ ways of knowing and their understanding of religious beliefs as expressive of truth, Griffiths, Netland, and D’Costa shift the emphasis of the discussion and widen the possibilities for theological engagement with diverse religious traditions. Specifically, the focus of the new exclusivist positions is epistemological-soteriological in nature rather than eschatological-soteriological, as is the case in classic exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

In my final section, I weave together positions offered by philosophically and epistemologically minded theologians to complement the positive achievements of Griffiths, Netland, and D’Costa and, more specifically, to adumbrate a “stance” toward religious diversity that (1) recognizes religions

² Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: HarperOne: 2001) 3.

as being in the business of making truth claims and (2) regards religious believers as sincere and serious agents of religious beliefs. Such a stance, I contend, is necessary to ground Christian theologies of religious pluralism in the situated and embodied encounter with religious others.

OLD WINE, OLD WINESKINS

For most theologians reflecting on religious diversity as a significant theological issue—from the New Testament writers, to third-century bishops, to citizens of today's democracies—the central question driving the inquiry is soteriological and eschatological: are non-Christians saved in the end? If so, how is this the case? And if not, why not? Salvation is a central question in the Christian tradition, and so it is unsurprising that it plays a dominant role in the Christian imagination about the religious other. The logic of this soteriological orientation runs as follows: membership in the Christian church entails a commitment to Jesus Christ who—both biblically and traditionally—offers his disciples salvation. How must Christians think about this offer for salvation when it comes to non-Christians? Is salvation extended to them as well?

The salvation of religious others is both the motivating reason for the inquiry and the goal of inquiry itself in classic exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist approaches to religious diversity. They begin with the concern for non-Christian salvation and conclude with a judgment about it. For classic exclusivists, inclusivists, and pluralists, religious diversity is a soteriological problem that is fundamentally about the manner in which diverse religious traditions function in the (Christian) eschatological scheme for humankind. While they may tolerate, learn from, accept, and/or embrace the followers of other traditions, Christians find themselves needing to reckon with the question of who is saved and who is not.

If one looks at religious diversity as principally an eschatological and soteriological problem, there are three possible responses correlating to the three classic positions: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.³ They are (1) to claim that non-Christians do not have access to salvation; (2) to develop a theological principle (such as Karl Rahner's anonymous Christian) that explains how non-Christians can be granted Christian salvation; or (3) to argue that all religions have equal access to a universal form of salvation.

Exclusivists typically begin and complete their inquiry into religious pluralism with reflection grounded in a methodologically literalist reading of the Bible and a literalist appropriation of the tradition, using Cyprian's dictum *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* as a "proof text." While exclusivist theologians

³ A fourth, less common possibility is available in Mark Heim's notion of "multiple salvations," which holds that religions access different ultimate ends. See S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000).

may assiduously study other religious traditions and engage with other religious people, they also always emphasize the uniqueness of the Christian message, the particularity of Jesus Christ, and the finality of God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ revealed to us in the Bible. Exclusionist theologians take the position that, as Paul Knitter writes, "they are simply holding to the clear message of the New Testament" and that "one of [its] most evident and central messages is that Jesus is the means, the only means . . . that God has given to humans [for salvation]."⁴ Christian belief and practice alone constitute the one, true religion.

In a sense, exclusivism follows naturally from religious conviction.⁵ If Christians *really* believe Jesus' message that salvation comes only through him and believe in the necessity of discipleship, then how could Christians also affirm the salvific significance of other religious traditions? Such an affirmation would be at least in tension and at most incompatible with the central convictions of Christianity. While this characterization of exclusivism may seem severe, it is not as though exclusivists are not aware of the contentiousness of their position. Netland, for example, states that exclusivism is "especially difficult . . . to maintain once [one is] exposed to the great religious figures in other traditions."⁶ Exclusivists acknowledge the compelling power of other religious beliefs, practices, and leaders. Indeed, exclusivists themselves may even find such things compelling.

Yet, they maintain the position that salvation comes only in and through Christ because this position, as classic exclusivists frame it, is most authentic to the Christian message.⁷ Thus, while exclusivists acknowledge the richness in other religious traditions and perhaps see their ethical values, cultural beauty, and even meaning for adherents, exclusivists cannot accept these traditions as soteriologically efficacious for the eschaton. Christianity is the only option for salvation; non-Christians lie beyond the pale of salvation.

Criticisms of Classic Exclusivism

While soteriological exclusivism has been the dominant position throughout most of Christian history,⁸ it has largely fallen out of favor in academic theology. As Paul Hedges writes, "although many . . . feel that [exclusivism]

⁴ Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002) 27.

⁵ Paul J. Griffiths articulates this point straightforwardly in *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001) 154; but as I will suggest in the following paragraphs, this is a common interpretation of "what lies behind" exclusivism.

⁶ Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Vancouver: Regent College, 1999) 28.

⁷ Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue* 23.

⁸ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* 19.

is the traditional/normative/most committed Christian approach, it is far from being the mainstay of Christian thought.”⁹ (Hedges’s own position is that exclusivism is “not only untenable but also radically unchristian.”¹⁰) However, as Knitter notes, “To dismiss [exclusivism] as outdated is to hide from the fact that these attitudes *do* represent a strong, and an increasingly louder, voice within the Christian population.”¹¹ While exclusivist positions may no longer hold precedence in Christian theological discussions on religious diversity, Knitter recommends that theologians still need to engage with exclusivist positions. The reason Knitter gives for engaging with exclusivism, however, is not its theological or philosophical legitimacy, but its presence on the popular Christian scene.

This is not to deride Knitter’s reasoning or even to oppose an argument (such as Hedges’s) for the ultimate untenability of exclusivism. Rather Knitter’s point brings to light something significant about the way today’s theologians tend to view exclusivism: it is categorically different from inclusivism and pluralism. In an article responding to Gavin D’Costa, John Hick suggests a similar idea: “But in fact religious exclusivism and religious pluralism are of different logical kinds, the one being self-committing affirmation of faith and the other a philosophical hypothesis.”¹² Hick sees exclusivism and pluralism as distinctive in both content and kind. The assumption is that exclusivism represents a position of faith rather than a position of calculated theory. This resonates with the implication of Knitter’s remark that exclusivism ought to be addressed because of its ubiquity and not, presumably, because of its theoretical merits.

But why should this view of exclusivism be accepted? While my purpose here is not to defend an exclusivist position per se, it is to point out ways that exclusivist positions shift the focus of theologies of religions’ discourse from the issue of salvation (soteriology) to the issue of belief (epistemology). I argue that contemporary exclusivists reshape the scope of the Christian theological conversation on religious diversity in ways that are not only interesting and exciting but also crucial for accurately characterizing what is at stake in the theology of religions.

What Is Really at Stake?

The classic responses to religious diversity, particularly the exclusivist response, tend to be externally oriented, “top down,” and theological in nature. They are primarily concerned with the religious other in theory—that

⁹ Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue* 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 138.

¹¹ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* 19.

¹² John Hick, “The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Response to Gavin D’Costa,” *Religious Studies* 33 (1997) 161–66, at 163.

is, in the abstract—and with the other’s soteriological status. There are good reasons to contest such an approach to religious diversity. Terrence Tilley, for example, notes that the “problem” of religious diversity is properly understood as a situated problem, rather than an abstract one, because it is as embodied persons that we encounter religious others.¹³ Focusing on the problem of salvation obscures from view the actual religious beliefs of the diverse believers in question—believers who take their beliefs to be true, and keystones in their worldviews. Moreover, the soteriological focus makes diversity into a “future” issue rather than a present or imminent one.

Religious diversity raises questions about not only the salvation of others but also their religious beliefs and, perhaps more importantly, one’s own beliefs. The fact that multiple thoughtful, honest, and sincere people engage in different religious practices and hold different sets of beliefs raises an important epistemological problem: if people think their beliefs are true and there are multiple, conflicting beliefs, then what is the epistemological status of these beliefs? Can we continue to hold to our beliefs as true while being aware that others hold different beliefs as true? Religious diversity raises a case of epistemic disagreement that is realized in the everyday contexts of ordinary religious believers.

Approaching religious diversity from a primarily soteriological point of view and with a soteriological warrant misses the situated and embodied factors that affect one’s experience with and understanding of religious diversity as well as the imminent aspects of the religious diversity “problem.” The new exclusivists attend to just these kinds of issues. In their attention to epistemological issues raised by religious pluralism, I argue in the following section, the new exclusivists make an invaluable contribution. If exclusivism (in both its classic and new forms) is seen as fundamentally a position generated only by faith conviction, this contribution will be unfortunately sidelined.

NEW WINE, OLD WINESKINS

In this section, I introduce the work of Griffiths, Netland, and D’Costa, who develop new exclusivist positions. In doing so, they explore different layers of religious diversity and employ a more “bottom up” method, which is to say they begin from the experience of encountering religious others rather than from abstract principles about religious diversity.¹⁴ The new

¹³ Terrence W. Tilley, *The Wisdom of Religious Commitment* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1995) 26.

¹⁴ While Griffiths, Netland, and D’Costa do not follow the “top down” methods of the classic approaches, I hesitate to use the term “bottom up.” This phrase is characteristically—and rightly—applied to describe the methods of liberation theologies, which take as their starting point the suffering of the communities in which

exclusivists reveal alternative patterns of orientation toward religious diversity and offer ways to consider belief and truth as necessary parts of the situated and embodied encounter with religious diversity that is important in the “here and now.”

Paul Griffiths and the Uneasiness Conditions

Griffiths poses a range of questions he sees as generated by diversity. His questions are epistemological and framed self-reflectively: What should one think about *one's own* religious beliefs and commitments, given religious diversity? Should the awareness of religious diversity reduce one's epistemic confidence in one's own beliefs?¹⁵ From the outset Griffiths, a paradigmatic new exclusivist, shifts the burden of inquiry from “them” to “us.” Thus, the problem of diversity is not “what do we do about them?” but rather, given religious diversity, “how do we think about ourselves and our own beliefs?” Griffiths's work focuses on the possible epistemological responses—many of which are *internally* directed—to the awareness of diversity.

To deal with these epistemological responses, Griffiths must make a case for why religious diversity is an epistemological problem at all. He begins his explanation by offering a theory of religion. He takes religion to be a form of life that is both comprehensive and of central importance in the life of the believer.¹⁶ If this is the case, then the statements made by religious people about their religious beliefs ought to be taken seriously as truth claims. Making a religious claim, Griffiths argues, involves accepting or assenting to a particular form of life.¹⁷ Thus, in the face of diversity, important questions are to be raised not just about salvation but, even prior to that, about the actual truth of one's own and others' religious claims.¹⁸

The underlying purpose of Griffiths's work is to establish a problem or set of problems of religious diversity beyond the soteriological ones. He discusses the epistemological implications of diversity and offers three ways in which religious claims conflict or are discordant; they may be contradictory, contrary, or noncompossible. Contradictory claims both make a truth

they are grounded. The new exclusivists do not pull from actual “on the ground” accounts of religious belief and practice in this way. However, because these approaches at least begin from hypothetical, generalized accounts of belief and practice rather than from abstract theological or philosophical questions, it is important to draw a distinction between their method and that of the classic approaches. A term such as “middle down” would most accurately characterize their method, but I use “bottom up” for simplicity's sake and for drawing the contrast clearly.

¹⁵ Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* 70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 17.

claim, but one must rule out the other. (A lesser or modified version of contradictoriness is approximate contradictoriness, which pertains when religious claims are not formally contradictory.) Contrary religious claims also intend to assert something true, but neither *needs* to be.¹⁹ Finally, noncompossible claims are those that prescribe courses of action (for the persons subject to the claims) that are mutually exclusive.

In the encounter with religious others, people have the opportunity to become aware of the contradictoriness, contrariety, and/or noncompossibility of their beliefs. It is precisely in the context of interreligious conversation that a Muslim, for example, can learn about the Buddhist belief in a nontheistically guided universe and recognize it as a contradiction of his own belief. Realizations such as these generate what Griffiths calls “epistemic uneasiness.”²⁰ What he captures with this notion is that contradictory, contrary, and noncompossible beliefs present not just logical problems, but religious, epistemological, and existential ones as well. Our religious beliefs both make truth claims and prescribe right actions. Thus, the epistemic uneasiness brought about by the fact of opposing beliefs should lead us to question the validity of both that truth and guideline for right action.

Specifically, Griffiths sees three situations that generate epistemic uneasiness; these can be called his “uneasiness conditions.” One should be uneasy if: (1) the dissenting religious claims are authoritative and come from trustworthy sources; (2) one had little confidence in one’s own beliefs to begin with;²¹ and (3) one’s religious beliefs lack a “rider” or “codicil” for successfully explaining the existence of diverse (and dissenting) religious beliefs.²² If any of these conditions are met, then Griffiths recommends that believers should be troubled and lower their confidence in the truth of their beliefs.

Religious diversity does not, for Griffiths, undercut religious beliefs. Rather, it presents believers with an opportunity to be more thoughtful about and more present to diversity’s deep implications. He writes: “Epistemic uneasiness often (and properly) produced by increasing Christian awareness of deep diversity should be acknowledged as a neuralgic point of creative conceptual growth for Christian thought.”²³

¹⁹ Ibid. 32–34.

²⁰ Ibid. 97.

²¹ Ibid. 73.

²² Ibid. 74–75.

²³ Ibid. 97. This passage manifests a significant internal tension in Griffiths’s work. He writes in two distinctive genres and for two distinct audiences. On the one hand, he discusses diversity from a generically religious standpoint for a “disinterested” scholarly community. On the other hand, he approaches diversity as a believer in Christianity’s truths and writes for a community that, like him, makes sense of diversity by thinking of it in the service of Christian theology. These genres and corresponding audiences overlap at times, as this passage shows. The kinds of

Griffiths's primary intention is to reframe the approach to religious diversity in terms of truth, epistemology, and philosophical coherence, rather than in terms of soteriology. Griffiths does not offer a highly developed solution to the problem of religious diversity.²⁴ In fact, he only accentuates the problem by showing that it is an epistemological as well as a soteriological problem. He aims to present the precise epistemological issues that religious diversity raises and to suggest ways theologians have (or have not) dealt with them.

Religious diversity, in essence, brings about a situation that forces believers to question their beliefs, because it generates epistemic uneasiness. At the heart of Griffiths's work lies his firm conviction that appealing to the privatization of religious belief as an explanation for diversity is not a plausible or meaningful way to account for it. On a privatized account of religious belief, each religious believer can have confidence in her belief (thus dismissing all three uneasiness conditions) because she has confidence in her belief formation. While privatization provides an "epistemic haven," Griffiths states, this does not make it an accurate explanation or an epistemologically good response.²⁵ He first shows that, in the day-to-day lives of ordinary people, religious diversity presses on epistemological questions; he then anticipates and dismisses strategies (such as the privatization argument) that do not face these issues head on.

Harold Netland and Logical Criteria for Evaluation

Netland states that the theological discussion of religious diversity has been predominantly a debate about the extent to which God operates in other religious traditions.²⁶ Construed this way, the discussion is essentially nonepistemological. The focus on God's presence and action, Netland claims, amounts to a functionalist or pragmatist interpretation of religion. In such a reading the guiding question is about God's function and religion's response. This reveals an underlying assumption that what is most important about religion—its very essence—is its function. If religions are

perspective that Griffiths develops in the latter genre (diversity in the service of Christian theology) necessarily informs his conclusions about religious diversity. This becomes especially clear in his theory of restrictivism.

²⁴ In fact, Griffiths does present a constructive solution to the problem of diversity, although it is not developed (he calls it a "bare-bones account" [ibid. 166]). He terms his position "restrictivism," a form of universalism (universal salvation). He holds that, while belonging to Christianity is necessary for salvation, he leaves "belonging to" sufficiently undefined so that who does and does not belong is unclear (ibid. 164–65).

²⁵ Ibid. 83–84.

²⁶ Netland, *Dissonant Voices* 20.

characterized primarily by what they do in response to God, then they will be judged according to how well they do it.²⁷

Netland finds fault with this approach because, he claims, the function of religion is not the central issue: “the most important question is not what a religion does for society, but rather whether what it affirms about the nature of reality is in fact the case.”²⁸ In other words, what is most significant about religious traditions is the truth to which they attest. Functionalist views of religion—in their attention to what religions do above what they claim—are misguided and ultimately disregard truth. By disregarding truth, functionalist views of religion lead to “vacuous relativism [wherein] all beliefs are granted equal status and no one perspective is allowed to have priority over or rule out competing alternatives.”²⁹ That is, if religions are not judged on the basis of their truth claims, then they are all equally “true.” For functionalists, therefore, religious diversity does not generate conflict.

Taking a functionalist view of religion is one strategy for “solving” the problem of diversity. But these are not the only strategies Netland censures. In his view, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and John Hick develop positions that attend to religious truth claims and yet still lead to vacuous relativism. Their approaches begin by suggesting that truth comes in both propositional and nonpropositional forms. Cantwell Smith and Hick hold that truth in “the logically basic sense” is “a quality or property of propositions” and can be stated in linguistic form.³⁰

The second way that theologians such as Cantwell Smith understand truth, Netland claims, is that it is “not a static property of propositions or doctrines but rather a dynamic product of human involvement with what is said to be true.”³¹ There is no truth apart from how a person absorbs it in his life and assents to it in action. In other words, truth is expressed through dynamic action and behavior. In terms of religion, and particularly the issue of religious diversity, this means that statements of belief, professions of faith, or systematic truth claims are not the only or even the most important objects of evaluation. Rather, ritual actions, patterns of behavior, and the forms of life engaged in by believers should also be seen as expressive of truth.

For Netland, this strategy heightens the second view of truth at the expense of the first: pluralists hold that religions are evaluated by the

²⁷ Ibid. 156–57. For Netland, pluralist strategies employ such a functionalist view of religion.

²⁸ Harold A. Netland, “Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth,” *Missiology: An International Review* 15.2 (1987) 77–95, at 92.

²⁹ Netland, *Dissonant Voices* 30.

³⁰ Ibid. 114.

³¹ Ibid. 119.

truth they express, but this truth is most significantly manifested by what religious people do or how they function. What “counts” for pluralists is nonpropositional truth. Netland calls this a “powerful and influential” strategy because, by redefining the terms of truth, it *looks as if* truth claims are taken into account, but ultimately pluralists promote a disguised form of functionalism that thereby leads to relativism. To Netland’s mind, the pluralist strategy is a convenient or expedient response to religious diversity. He states that when one is “disquieted” by religious plurality—when one confronts alternative deeply and sincerely held religious beliefs and is arrested by that fact—relativism is an “easy option.”³²

To repeat, Netland’s fundamental claim is that “the most important basis on which to evaluate various religions is the question of truth.”³³ The question of truth is inescapable and, no matter what strategy one takes to avoid it, it will ultimately percolate to the surface. Insofar as dynamic human action is expressive of a religion’s truth, even truth-oriented functionalist interpretations of religion must eventually reckon with the question of truth precisely *because* nonpropositional truth is human dynamic engagement with propositional truth.³⁴ Netland does not disagree with a strategy that points out two forms of truth—propositional and nonpropositional. In fact, he takes up the basic insight that nonpropositional truth is dynamic and important for evaluating religious traditions. However, he argues that propositional and nonpropositional truth are inextricably related. *Contra* a pluralist position (such as Cantwell Smith’s), “personal truth which is [a type of nonpropositional truth] should not be regarded as an alternative to propositional truth.”³⁵

Scholarly evaluation of religions should go beyond statements, but should do so without losing sight of the nonpropositional truth claims that are entailed by action. Netland asserts it *is* the case that religions make genuinely incompatible truth claims: “While . . . mere difference in perspective in and of itself does not entail opposition of beliefs, there are instances in which the various religions clearly do seem to be making mutually

³² Ibid. 29.

³³ Ibid. 166.

³⁴ The phrase “product of human involvement” marks another underlying meaning of Netland’s claim. Human involvement or participation in truth suggests the idea that truth precedes or exists prior to human expression of it, and it is human involvement in—not creation of—truth that allows for truth to manifest itself in the world. Since Netland is a Christian, I take him to be bringing Christian grace into the equation; grace allows humans to become involved with God’s truth and to “profess” that truth through religious actions and statements of belief.

³⁵ Netland, “Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth” 91.

incompatible claims about the nature of reality.”³⁶ Both Netland’s view of the nature of truth and his understanding of the relationship between propositional and nonpropositional truth lead him to deduce that religions make genuinely incompatible claims.

Netland also claims that these incompatibilities occur at both doctrinal (belief) and ethical (action) levels. Finally, he states that, given the data of diverse traditions, it is “prima facie untenable” to argue that religions are all just culturally conditioned responses to one ultimate reality.³⁷ Both his theory of the relationship between propositional and nonpropositional truth and his textured descriptions of various religious traditions contribute to this final judgment. In sum, his position is this: when considering religious diversity, truth is at stake; “truths” do conflict, and positing an abstract theory of universal truth to handle conflicts is unacceptable. Stated another way, Netland is convinced that there is but one real and particular truth with which other particular “truths” necessarily conflict. As a scholar, it is his task to set up a system by which “truths” can be evaluated.

Whether Netland’s project is convincing hinges on his ability to demonstrate that his proposal for evaluating religious traditions is not only *not* problematic but is in fact the very way to do religious traditions justice.³⁸ His understanding of truth as both propositional and nonpropositional or dynamic contributes to doing religions justice. He states: “If we are to have a comprehensive understanding of the religious traditions of humankind that takes seriously both the varied data of the religions and is epistemologically sound, it is very difficult to escape the conclusion that at least some of the central claims of some religions must be false.”³⁹ In short, religious people take themselves seriously as positing truth claims; so too should scholars who evaluate those claims.⁴⁰ If scholars take the conflict of religious truth claims seriously, they must make judgments about them—some will be true, and some will be false.

³⁶ Netland, *Dissonant Voices* 110.

³⁷ Netland, *Dissonant Voices* 111.

³⁸ Netland here reveals his commitment to a general epistemic principle that undergirds his entire project. He writes: “Irrespective of whether one adopts a favorable, unfavorable, or even an indifferent attitude toward religions, one cannot escape at least implicitly making some judgments about the desirability or propriety of belonging to particular religious traditions” (ibid. 155). This statement reveals his view of knowledge as necessarily involving judgment: without the step of judgment, knowing is incomplete and impotent. This view reflects a theory of knowledge developed by Bernard J. F. Lonergan in *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992); it sees knowledge not as just “taking a look” but rather as fundamentally a task of judgment.

³⁹ Netland, *Dissonant Voices* 233.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 228.

Netland must identify how or by what standards it is possible to make these evaluations or judgments. He argues that “some non-arbitrary criteria exist”⁴¹ that can be “legitimately” applied to evaluate competing religious worldviews.⁴² He identifies five categories of ostensibly nonarbitrary criteria for evaluating truth claims expressed both propositionally and dynamically by religious believers.⁴³ If a religious claim fails on any of these counts, Netland argues, the religious claim is not true, and possibly the religion itself can be rejected as false.

Netland defends the legitimacy of exclusivism both theoretically and concretely. Exclusivism, he contends, need not be only *Christian* exclusivism. Because he sees his standards for evaluation as “non-arbitrary” as well as logical and philosophical in nature (rather than, say, theological or cultural), exclusivism can come in any form—Hindu, Muslim, etc. Exclusivism also does not hold that all claims of other religions are necessarily false or their practices nonvirtuous such that exclusivists cannot learn from them.⁴⁴

Concretely, Netland defends a Christian exclusivist position. For him, Christian beliefs “pass” the necessary tests; in other words, when analyzed in terms of his putative nonarbitrary criteria, Christian claims succeed where other religious claims fail. If Christian claims meet these standards and the claims of other religious traditions do not, it follows that Christian beliefs are true and opposing beliefs are false:

If indeed one is justified in accepting the Christian faith as true—as I’m convinced is the case—then one is also justified in making judgments about other religious traditions on the basis of Christian teaching, and in rejecting as false those beliefs from other traditions that are incompatible with the Christian faith.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ibid. 152.

⁴² Ibid. 183.

⁴³ Competing claims can be judged according to (1) basic logical principles such as the principle of identity, noncontradiction, and the excluded middle. According to the principle of identity, Netland writes, “when [it is] applied to statements . . . if a statement is true, then it is true.” The principle of noncontradiction builds on this idea, holding that the same thing cannot be one thing and another thing at the same time. For propositions, this means that a statement cannot be both true and false at the same time. Finally, the principle of the excluded middle maintains that any statement must be true or false (there is no “middle” state into which it can fall). If a claim violates any of these principles, it cannot be judged to be true. Claims can also be tested for (2) self-defeat. If a religious claim “provides the grounds for its own refutation” (i.e., defeats itself), then that claim cannot be true. A religious claim must also be tested for its (3) coherence of worldview; (4) explanatory adequacy within a relevant range; and (5) consistency with knowledge in other fields (ibid. 183–88).

⁴⁴ Ibid. 35.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 195.

While Netland does not argue that Christianity has a “monopoly on truth,” he still makes a strong claim about the status of other religious traditions regarding truth.⁴⁶

To be sure, the follower of another religion is not yet in a saving relationship with God, and indeed, like all persons who have not responded to God’s grace in Jesus, lives in a state of rebellion and disobedience. But this should not obscure the fact that even here there is a fundamental relationship of the creator to the creation, the human creature being made in the image of the creator.⁴⁷

Netland concludes with a statement on the theological status of non-Christian religious people—that, though they are in a state of rebellion and disobedience (not to mention that they habitually lie), they are still closely related to God.

From Netland’s perspective, his hands are tied; given his Christian beliefs and the criteria by which he adjudicates conflicting beliefs, he reaches the only possible conclusion about non-Christians religions. But his position is problematic less for its conclusion than for the “non-arbitrary” evaluative standards by which he reaches it. For example, he draws on the Western philosophical tradition to develop his criteria and yet ignores the fact of historical collusion between Western philosophy and religious traditions in the West (especially Christianity). He misses the point that the religious traditions that have developed in a close—and even indivisible—relationship with the Aristotelian philosophical tradition will be more likely to meet the “non-arbitrary” standards than those traditions that are closely tied to non-Western philosophies. Nevertheless, the salient lesson to be taken from Netland’s proposal is that objective criteria—in some form—might be developed for evaluating religious beliefs, even if they are not the particular criteria that he himself develops.

Gavin D’Costa and Reading Diversity Theologically

Today’s scholarly discussion on religious diversity, Gavin D’Costa alleges, is stunted: theological theories on world religions are given short shrift because they are seen as having biased rather than disinterested foundations. The “outsider” or rejected status assigned to theology by contemporary academia can be traced to the construction of the concept of religion itself. According to D’Costa, “religion” was invented by the 16th-century Platonist philosophers at Cambridge University.⁴⁸ Leaving aside the details of D’Costa’s account of how “religions” came to be today, it is sufficient to note one highly relevant point he makes about the construction of

⁴⁶ Ibid. 294.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 298.

⁴⁸ D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions* 57–58.

religion: it became privatized with the rise of the Western nation-state, which then “exported” it to the rest of the world.⁴⁹

D’Costa’s crucial claim is that religions—and so religious diversity—are understood today according to a privatized account that sees religions as closed, private systems that therefore must be translated to outsiders. D’Costa firmly opposes this notion. In his view, the idea that religion can and must be put in terms of public, “secular” reason fails to consider that the distinctive qualities of religious traditions can be lost or damaged in translation. Moreover, the expectation of “clean translation,” which conjectures that religion can be explored and studied only through unbiased, secular reason, does not acknowledge the inherent biases of an allegedly “unbiased” account.⁵⁰

For D’Costa, these problematic assumptions—that religion can be translated and that secular reason, as unbiased and pure, is in the unique position to do the translating—lead to a hegemonic dominance of secularist interpretations of religious traditions. The upshot of the privatized account is that it ultimately bars theological readings—thought to be *in principle* at odds with secular reason—from entering the conversation on religious diversity. D’Costa argues that *all* readings are interpretive and biased, theological readings as well as secular readings, in that they are politically and socially “interested.”⁵¹ But for D’Costa, theological readings are better than ideological secular readings—those guided by political or social commitments—because theological readings forthrightly acknowledge their commitments.

D’Costa’s goal is to route the discussion on religious diversity back into theological territory: “Theology’s reading of the world religions, in their particularity and complexity, is the most truthful reading available.”⁵² Like Griffiths and Netland, D’Costa is clear about the types of theological perspectives that are useful and adequate for understanding religious pluralism. He appeals to a helpful distinction drawn by Stephen Duffy between two types of theological discourse—*a priori* and *a posteriori* theologies—on religious diversity in order to show which one D’Costa sees as useful and adequate. These two ways of reading religious diversity have different outcomes; they answer different questions for different audiences, and should not be confused.⁵³

Comparative theologies are the foremost representative of *a posteriori* theologies. As Duffy puts it, they “demand detailed knowledge of other

⁴⁹ Ibid. 99.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 113–15.

⁵¹ Ibid. 94–95.

⁵² Ibid. 101.

⁵³ Ibid. 41. D’Costa makes the point that even “secular” readings of diversity will employ one of these ways of reading.

traditions.”⁵⁴ While D’Costa appreciates the highly textured and careful work of comparative theologians, he is critical of the comparative theological movement for shying away from making truth claims.⁵⁵ Comparativists intentionally and exclusively focus on “inculturation” but do so “out of relation with mission and dogmatics”;⁵⁶ they avoid “the process of judgment and the issue of truth.” D’Costa perhaps exaggerates the extent to which comparative theologians suspend a concern for truth, but he makes an important point: their primary goal is to engage in careful comparative work, not in theological explanation.

D’Costa also criticizes *a priori* theologies. Duffy writes that *a priori* theologies are addressed “solely to the faith commitments and the theological positions held within a Christian community.”⁵⁷ Like Griffiths, D’Costa faults the barely ancillary status that *a priori* theologies grant to “truth.” While religious diversity may call for Christian theologians to take a position on the soteriological status of non-Christians, D’Costa asserts that this cannot be done without an epistemological framework that discloses how religious people know or make truth claims: “Final salvation requires not only an ontological and causal, but also an epistemological, relationship to Christ.”⁵⁸

In short, D’Costa’s position is this: Religious diversity demands a response. This response can be properly generated only from a theological perspective and must, at least in some sense, make a truth statement. The real question of religious diversity for theologians is about the *way* in which Christian grace actually brings about salvation for non-Christians.⁵⁹ D’Costa asserts that no developed answer to this question exists, and he sees his project as meeting this need. He calls his position “universal access exclusivism” and defines it with four tenets: (1) All people will have an opportunity (in either this life or the afterlife) to hear the gospel; (2) God always reveals the gospel, even to those who do not hear it; (3) we must

⁵⁴ Stephen J. Duffy, “A Theology of the Religions and/or a Comparative Theology?” *Horizons* 26 (1999) 105–15, at 109.

⁵⁵ Perry Schmidt-Leukel raises a parallel criticism of comparative theology: “If proponents of comparative theology exclude, at the outset, the possibility of revision and significant transformation as a potential result of their comparative work, or if they denounce such transformation as distortion, then the seriousness of their endeavors as a pursuit of truth is questionable” (*Transformation by Integration: How Inter-faith Encounter Changes Christianity* [London: SCM, 2009] 103).

⁵⁶ D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions* 40. Francis X. Clooney, in his most recent book, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2010), overturns this reading of the method and aims of comparative theology.

⁵⁷ Duffy, “A Theology of the Religions and/or a Comparative Theology?” 107.

⁵⁸ D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions* 24.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 210.

accept it as a legitimate theological mystery as to how God reaches the unevangelized; and (4), while Christian faith and baptism are the normal means for salvation, there are other ways people can prepare themselves for salvation.⁶⁰ His position is exclusivist in the sense that it is *only* through Christian means that people are offered salvation. However, the universal access factor constructs a “way in” for non-Christians, which D’Costa devises epistemologically.

Even though D’Costa can find no immediate answer to the question of how non-Christians are *actually* saved, he looks within the tradition for resources to answer this question.⁶¹ The principal message he conveys is that any adequate theological response to religious diversity must involve a robust epistemological component. Thinking through diversity demands that theologians consider how believers actually know or claim truth. Because D’Costa deems it illegitimate to construe religions as private institutions that cannot be externally, critically evaluated, he sees it as possible (and in fact necessary) to confront epistemologically the particular beliefs of religious traditions.

Contributions and Limitations of the New Exclusivists

A central, though understated, way by which Griffiths, Netland, and D’Costa advance the theological discussion of religious pluralism lies in how they conceptually construct religion and, by extension, religious beliefs and believers. Recall that both Griffiths and D’Costa criticize the privatization of religious beliefs, and that Netland rejects the functionalist interpretation of religion. In discussing privatization as it pertains to the belief-forming process, Griffiths rejects the idea that beliefs are formed by the individual alone and thus are not subject to outside criticism or evaluation. D’Costa is similarly concerned with privatization as it applies to a whole religious tradition; he rejects the notion that, as privatized, religions are sequestered and so can be understood only through the lens of “objective” secular reason and as such cannot rightly be challenged by claims internal to other (private) religious traditions. Netland makes a case against the functionalist interpretation of religion as fundamentally reductionistic; as an alternative he offers

⁶⁰ Ibid. 31.

⁶¹ Christ’s descent into hell provides D’Costa with a model that allows his “universal access exclusivism” to include a “post-mortem solution.” This solution posits that only in the afterlife can non-Christians gain access to salvation, because it is there that knowledge of the truth comes to fruition (ibid. 162). For D’Costa, knowledge and salvation are necessarily linked; one cannot be saved by Christ without knowing the truth offered in Christ. D’Costa incorporates into his model the doctrine of Christ’s descent into hell, because “only in the event of the ‘descent’ does the unity of the epistemological and ontological take place” (ibid. 67).

a more robust understanding of the “essence” of religion and the religious truth expressed therein.

Griffiths, Netland, and D’Costa also make invaluable contributions to the theological discussion of religious diversity by foregrounding truth and, by extension, epistemology (insofar as epistemology is a method for discussing religious truth expressed through belief). Although “truth” is central to their discussions, it is not always clear just what *about* truth is at issue. While the exclusivist approaches are commendable for advancing the conversation by showing the problems of religious beliefs in the context of diversity, it is not clear that they offer viable solutions. While they do not simply *assume* the place of truth, what Griffiths, Netland, and D’Costa assert about truth is bound up in other concepts (such as salvation) in such a way as to obscure their concepts of the various conditions and criteria for truth. Neither is it clear that Griffiths, Netland, and D’Costa (and other theologians who raise epistemological concerns) share the same concerns with each other about truth and religious diversity. As a consequence, theologians end up talking past one another when discussing epistemological topics. Are they theorizing about the conditions for true belief? Are they developing criteria by which to evaluate religious beliefs as true? And can they address how the conditions for true belief and criteria for evaluating belief fit together?

In all three cases, the strength of the insights Griffiths, Netland, and D’Costa provide on epistemology also call attention to their weaknesses or at least to how they fail clearly to address the categories they are working with—that is, whether their discussions are defining conditions for truth or criteria for judging beliefs. Griffiths neatly clarifies the way religious beliefs function as truth claims and, as such, come into conflict. He offers a theory of the conditions for true belief by making a case for how religious beliefs involve assent to a form of life. By providing a way for believers to think through their own beliefs, given diversity, Griffiths’s uneasiness conditions function as preliminary criteria for evaluating religious belief. While Griffiths suggests that the theologian’s task is to recognize and deal with epistemological conflicts (the uneasiness conditions make this possible), his culminating statements on the matter of truth are weighted more toward soteriology than epistemology. Thus, in the end he does not fully employ the conditions or criteria he lays out.

Netland convincingly argues that if religious beliefs make truth claims (rather than just lead to actions), and if these claims conflict, then they must be judged according to some independent standards. The evaluative criteria for judging belief that Netland proposes turn out to be less neutral or less objective than he thinks. Furthermore, he conflates Christian truth with a theory of the conditions for truth (that is, what makes something true is that it is Christian), thus undermining the objectivity of his account.

Finally, D'Costa, for his part, claims that whatever the answer to the problem of religious diversity is, it needs to be both epistemological and theological in nature. This connects with his notion that the criteria for evaluating religious belief must be theological in nature. Like Griffiths, however, D'Costa does not quite get around to developing an epistemological theory, and his understanding of the conditions for true belief, like Netland's, are putatively Christian.

NEW WINE, NEW WINESKINS

The classic approaches to religious diversity focus on salvation, a focus that is paired with a future, eschatological concern. This rings true in classic exclusivist formulations of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*; classic exclusivists examine the salvific viability of the diverse religions of the world to demonstrate the inadequacy of non-Christian religions regarding salvation. On the classic model, religious diversity is most pressing as an eschatological-soteriological issue. This does not mean that classical exclusivists are unconcerned with truth; it is rather that they *assume* the truth of Christian beliefs and *assume* an inextricable relationship between salvation and truth (i.e., Christianity is a "saving truth"). They are able to maintain this assumption because, given the cultural hegemony of Christianity in the contexts in which Christian theologians have written, there is little to challenge this assumption.

The new exclusivists are also concerned with salvation, but they focus on epistemological rather than eschatological concerns—on how religious claims are epistemologically formulated and function regarding the salvific efficacy of religious traditions. Griffiths, Netland, and D'Costa focus on truth because, given a shift in the cultural situation from their preceding generation—increased diversity across the globe and in their particular locales—they can no longer assume the truth of Christianity but must argue for it. The issue of truth, particularly as religions express it doctrinally, is thus foregrounded in these new approaches and developed through inquiry into believers' epistemic access to and understanding of truth. In the new models, religious diversity is most pressing as an *epistemological-soteriological* issue rather than an *eschatological-soteriological* one.

In a passage assessing the investigative goals of comparative theology, Perry Schmidt-Leukel notes two fields of inquiry for the study of religions: "the hermeneutical range of [a belief's] possible meaning" and "the epistemological range of [a belief's] possible truth."⁶² These categories are heuristically helpful for this discussion. While the hermeneutical and epistemological ranges may overlap, they are distinctive ranges, for one can

⁶² Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration* 101.

talk about the meaning of a religious belief without asking about its truth. Philosopher of religion Gary Gutting offers an example of discussing religious belief in terms of its hermeneutical range: “Since religious language is essentially talk about God, our question [about religious diversity] amounts to that of the meaning of talk about God.”⁶³ When religious beliefs are construed as expressive of meaning rather than truth, opposition and conflict recede into the background, and it is irrelevant to try to apply criteria for evaluating the truth of beliefs.

Take the following statement by theologian Gordon Kaufman regarding religious diversity as exemplary of this strategy. Kaufman writes that all religious claims are articulated in symbolic language. Symbolic language is a form of language whose “primary function is not so much to articulate ‘truths’ about the world and the human . . . as it is to present a framework within which basic orientation and meaning for the whole of human life can be formed.”⁶⁴ For Kaufman, beliefs are primarily statements that express meaning rather than make truth claims. He abstracts meaning from truth to preserve the sense that all religious claims are valuable, even if they conflict. Kaufman acknowledges that people in various traditions have ineffable religious experiences;⁶⁵ at the same time he holds that the primary function of religious belief is to express meaning rather than claim truth.

Opposition and conflict surface when the discussion is focused on a religion’s epistemological range of possible truth. Inquiry into a religion’s hermeneutical range and its epistemological range are distinct investigations—each with its own warrants and outcomes. Each kind of investigation has a role to play in the theological discussion of religious diversity. It is a mistake, however, to collapse their roles, thereby losing conceptual clarity about which investigation (into the hermeneutical range of possible meaning or the epistemological range of possible truth) holds priority or takes precedence.⁶⁶ Theologians mislead their readers when they are unclear about whether they are interested primarily in the hermeneutical range of meaning or the epistemological range of truth. What may seem a successful strategy for handling the philosophically and theologically thorny issues associated with religious diversity may be “successful” simply

⁶³ Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1983) 44.

⁶⁴ Gordon Kaufman, “Evidentialism?: A Theologian’s Response,” *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (2004) 35–46, at 41.

⁶⁵ James L. Fredericks, “A Universal Religious Experience?: Comparative Theology as an Alternative to Theology of Religions,” *Horizons* 22 (1995) 67–87, at 75.

⁶⁶ This is not to say that these investigations do not bear on each other in important ways, but merely that they are rightly understood as distinctive tasks.

because it investigates only the hermeneutical range, and does not acknowledge that it ignores or does not address the epistemological range.

Taking Beliefs (and Believers) Seriously

If we take beliefs seriously as statements of truth, as Griffiths, Netland, and D'Costa maintain we should (precisely because believers do so), then opposing religious beliefs will be problematic or challenging for our own beliefs. In short, as Erik Baldwin and Michael Thule write, we must acknowledge that "religious belief can be defeated by an awareness of religious pluralism."⁶⁷ That is, one's belief can be undermined, undercut, or damaged because one has become aware of other, conflicting religious beliefs. A Christian's awareness of the different prayers and rituals in which others engage make her wonder, for example, about what truth she claims through her own prayers and rituals.

Acknowledging the possibility of defeat for one's own religious beliefs need not be fatalistic or defeatist. Rather, this acknowledgment can cultivate a stance toward religious diversity that takes oneself and other believers seriously as professing beliefs that make truth claims. This stance is necessary if theological discussions on religious diversity are to address believers' real, situated, and embodied concerns about the religious diversity they encounter in daily life.

If it is the case that believers state beliefs as expressions of what they see as true, then beliefs should be subjected to critical, epistemological evaluation just as any other type of belief would. My contention is that theologians addressing religious diversity ought to develop a stance toward religious belief that takes beliefs and believers seriously in this way. Theologians may do this by subjecting religious beliefs to epistemological forms of evaluation. Following Gutting, I contend that those who argue that beliefs cannot really make a truth claim because religious beliefs are not "testable hypotheses" ignore the reality that factual data are relevant to believers.⁶⁸ Just because religious beliefs may not be empirically verifiable does not mean that empirical facts do not play a role in how one understands one's beliefs. Religious believers understand themselves to be professing truth when they profess beliefs; religious beliefs thus have a stake in truth.

If religions are forms of life that are both meaningful and make truth claims, if religious believers arrive at their beliefs not privately and not only for pragmatic reasons, and, finally, if religious believers come into contact with conflicting religious beliefs that can possibly defeat their own, then it

⁶⁷ Erik Baldwin and Michael Thune, "The Epistemological Limits of Experience-Based Exclusive Religious Belief," *Religious Studies* 44 (2008) 445–55, at 445.

⁶⁸ Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* 34–36.

may be the case that believers make what J. L. Schellenberg calls “comparative assessments” as a result of the encounter with religious diversity. Practically, this means that, for example, reflective Christians will “consider their beliefs to be as *probable* as alternatives from within their own tradition, *somewhat more probable than* the relevant alternatives from within Judaism and *considerably more probable than* Buddhist alternatives.”⁶⁹ In other words, believers will weigh their beliefs against other beliefs.

In this weighing process, it is incumbent upon believers to make sense of religious beliefs. The normative proposal—raised by Griffiths, Netland, and D’Costa—that religious believers *should* think critically about the truth status of their beliefs implicitly rejects the position that the fact of one’s holding a belief justifies holding that belief.⁷⁰ From an epistemological perspective, just because a person claims *x* does not mean that he is justified, rational, epistemically ethical, or reasonable in making that claim. The taking-belief-seriously stance toward diversity proposed here maintains that believers are epistemologically obliged to make sense of their beliefs, given the reality of religious diversity, rather than just take their beliefs for granted or accept them at face value. This stance requires believers to look more closely at what they believe, since what they believe functions as an assertion of truth.

A central consequence of this stance, which views beliefs as truth claims—and considers the conditions and criteria through which truth is understood and evaluated—and begins from the perspective of the situated, embodied believers who encounter religious diversity is that believers are responsible epistemic agents. I would argue that discussing the theological significance of religious diversity must always begin from the position of the situated and embodied believer who encounters diversity as an *epistemic* agent. Not only does this starting point offer equal respect for all members of diverse religious communities, but it also brings the theology-of-religions conversation down from the ethereal level of speculation.

⁶⁹ J. L. Schellenberg, “Pluralism and Probability,” *Religious Studies* 33 (1997) 143–59, at 146, emphases original.

⁷⁰ Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* 102. Gutting argues that what is justified here is not the truth of the belief but of the act of holding the belief.