

ABSOLUTISM TO ULTIMACY: RHETORIC AND REALITY OF RELIGIOUS “PLURALISM”

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The article questions the basic assumption underlying the so-called “Copernican revolution” in theology. The assumption is that the so-called “Ptolemaic theology” (which places one’s own religion at the center) is a mistake to be corrected. Examining the relevant data shows that this assumption is unwarranted. Undermining that assumption results in a fresh perspective that would enable us to leave behind the polemics of the pluralistic discussions and advance the conversation in more fruitful directions.

JOHN HICK ONCE OBSERVED that the controversy regarding religious pluralism is not well conducted.¹ The reason seems to be, partly at least, the rhetoric that has not only blurred the focus but also edged out the real issues from the discussion. Of the different issues involved in the discussion, I am concerned here with just one: the importance or otherwise of the particular and often unique features of a religious tradition in giving a theological account of religious diversity. From this viewpoint the contending sides are the original “pluralists” like Hick on the one side and the “particularists” like Mark Heim on the other.² The former seek to treat all the major religions of the world equally, downplaying the particularities and uniqueness of different religions, and one’s own religion then becomes “one among many.”³

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¹ John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 2.

² I borrow the term “particularism” from Yong Huang, though he uses it in a more restricted sense. See Yong Huang, “Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue: Beyond Universalism and Particularism,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37 (1995) 127–44.

³ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1989) 3; Hick, “The Theological Challenge

Particularists, by contrast, consider the particularities of different religions, especially of one's own religion, important. What remains foggy are the reasons for their respective positions. Sometimes pluralists portray the issue as a struggle between liberals and conservatives. Aligned with this is the idea that it is a conflict of two theological methods: one that takes the data of religions seriously and another that proceeds in an a priori dogmatic manner,⁴ resulting in what Hick calls "Ptolemaic theology." It is these related views that I will call the rhetoric of pluralism. The pitch of the rhetoric is prepared by lumping together different items such as theological ultimacy, religious uniqueness, and claims to religious superiority. My aim here is to clear out a bit of the fog surrounding these discussions by examining the reasons given by pluralists and particularists.

I will examine the veracity of the claim that the reason for this preference is an a priori, dogmatic procedure that ignores empirical data from the history of religions.⁵ Fortunately this is a verifiable claim, and therefore, focusing primarily on Hick's arguments for pluralism, I hope to show that the real issue between the two sides is not dogmatism or openness but the existential character of theology. This realization, in turn, helps us appreciate the distinction between the empirical study of religions and theology. It also helps us see that the lumping together of theological ultimacy, religious uniqueness, and claims to superiority is unwarranted. Keeping them distinct enables us to appreciate the uniqueness of religions without claims to superiority, acknowledge ultimacy, and repudiate absolutism. Such clarity, I hope, will help remove the polemical sting from the discussion and move it in newer ways such that the legitimate concern of pluralists—interreligious dialogue and collaboration—can be addressed.

The article has two parts. The first examines the claim that a dogmatic procedure of theology and its unwillingness to learn from other religions is the source of Ptolemaic theology. While it may be true of the personal histories of individual protagonists, I show it to be unwarranted as a general claim. The realization that lack of awareness and interaction with other religions is *not* the source of Ptolemaic theology enables us to look for its real source. This I venture in the second part, where I trace the source to the inescapably existential character of any lived philosophy, or theology,

of Religious Pluralism," in *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 179–94, at 179.

⁴ Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* 180.

⁵ Various names like "science of religions," "religious studies," "comparative religion," and "history of religion" are used for this field of study. Hick uses "history of religions." But since the differences between them is not important for my purpose, I use it broadly to refer to the study of religion as an object, as will become clearer in the second part of the article where I distinguish between a "horizon" that is never an object and the objects that appear within a horizon.

and, paradoxically, to the pluralistic theory itself. Finally, I draw out the implications of identifying the real source of Ptolemaic theology, the most important of which is correcting the view that Ptolemaic theology is a historical accretion that can be overcome. On the contrary, I argue that theology, if it is theology, will always be Ptolemaic, although I show this adjective to be utterly inapt. Finding the real source of Ptolemaic theology and the realization that it is not a historical accretion will also undermine pluralists’ justification for the indiscriminate use of terms like “absolutism” and “superiority” along with “uniqueness.” Although these terms are quite inappropriate, I continue to use them until their inappropriateness has been demonstrated.

PLURALISTS’ ARGUMENT

Death or Dialogue is the title of a book on interreligious dialogue, indicating the importance given to dialogue by contemporary theologians.⁶ Pluralists like John Hick and Paul Knitter think that this dialogical imperative calls for a “level playing field”⁷ where no religion would approach another with a sense of superiority. It would be impossible to have such a field with theological absolutism in place, they say. Absolutism is the view that one’s own religion is the final standard of truth or value in terms of which other religions are judged.⁸ The argument is developed primarily in terms of Christianity and is then extended to all religions. Absolutism is supposed to have appeared first in its severest form, exclusivism, as held by “conservatives.” Exclusivists hold that truth and/or salvation is to be found only in one’s own religion; other religions are false and therefore wrong. A milder version of absolutism is called “inclusivism,” which holds that other religions have some element of truth (or value), but that the fullness of truth (or value) is found in one’s own religion. This is said to be more “liberal” than exclusivism; while it is a mitigated form of absolutism, it still remains problematic for interreligious dialogue, as it does not provide a level playing field for different religions to engage in dialogue.⁹ Therefore, the argument goes, it is time to uproot

⁶ Leonard J. Swidler et al., eds., *Death or Dialogue?: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) vii.

⁷ Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002) 110. Hick agrees with this—see *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* 204.

⁸ This definition is based primarily on Hick’s use in “The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul Knitter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) 16–36.

⁹ Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* 185. This concern is expressed very well by Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris; see Pieris, “Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 51 (1987) 575–88.

the malady of absolutism of both kinds from the whole eco-cultural system of the human race.

To uproot something, we must first find the root. It is found in the uniqueness claims of religions, which are seen to be closely linked to superiority claims. Hick and Knitter acknowledge that the ordinary way of understanding uniqueness is not a problem.¹⁰ But when it comes to religions, uniqueness is indeed a problem because claims to religious uniqueness go hand in hand with claims to superiority. Hick and Knitter point to the example of Christianity, where uniqueness “has come to signify the unique definitiveness, absoluteness, normativeness, superiority of Christianity in comparison with other religions of the world.”¹¹ It is this sense of uniqueness, the sense of being superior, that needs to be rooted out. In short, although uniqueness is ordinarily not a problem, religious uniqueness is. In the case of religions, words like “uniqueness,” “superiority,” “absoluteness,” and “normativeness” are interchangeable. Therefore, uprooting the malady of absolutism turns out to be a fight against religious uniqueness.¹²

Since part of my task here is to show that religious uniqueness need not imply superiority, I will use “uniqueness” in its ordinary sense (being the only one of a kind) and use “superiority” for the kind of uniqueness that claims superiority. I will use “absolutism” as a general term to include both versions of superiority (inclusivism and exclusivism), unless I indicate otherwise.

The antidote to superiority, for Hick and Knitter, is to be found in the science of religions. We are told that “if any religion is going to make claims of superiority, it will have to do so on the basis of an ‘examination of facts’—i.e., some form of empirical or experiential data available to all.”¹³ Administering the antidote involves abandoning the old confessional approach to theology done in terms of one’s own tradition. What is required is a “Copernican revolution” in theology, a shift from the old Ptolemaic theology that placed one’s own religion at the center.¹⁴ The new theology will have to go “beyond the self-understanding of each [religious] tradition where each . . . regarded itself uniquely superior to others” and judges the matter of superiority “on impartial grounds.”¹⁵ Ptolemaic theology,

¹⁰ Hick and Knitter, *Myth of Christian Uniqueness* vii.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Though I am not aware of any explicit claim by pluralists that religious uniqueness is the cause of religious superiority, pluralists’ conflation of these notions and their zeal for denying the uniqueness of religions are clear indications of their thinking in this matter.

¹³ Hick and Knitter, *Myth of Christian Uniqueness* ix. See also Hick, *Christian Theology of Religions* 15.

¹⁴ John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, rev. ed. (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977) 120–32; Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 36.

¹⁵ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* 2.

like its astronomical counterpart, is a historical accident that is to be remedied with more up-to-date knowledge. The needed knowledge is to come from the science of religions. Any "comprehensive interpretation of religion must take account of all the major [religious] traditions, and not just of one's own."¹⁶ One's own religion now becomes "one among many." When theology is done in this manner, and the data from religions are examined impartially, absolutism in any form loses its support. Therefore, abandoning absolutist positions, the revolutionaries boldly adopt pluralism, which sees all religions as more or less on a par, and all as "different human responses to the *same ultimate* transcendent reality."¹⁷

In his earlier writings Hick described the Copernican revolution in theology in terms of "a shift from the *dogma* that Christianity is at the center to the thought that it is *God* who is at the center and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him."¹⁸ Later, as the realization dawns more clearly that "God" is not the center of all religions, he uses the term "Real" ("Ultimate," "Transcendent") instead of "God."

Having convinced himself of the need for such a tectonic shift in theological thinking, Hick goes about implementing it. As the change of terminology from "God" to "Real" indicates, Hick sees the need for a "considerable restructuring of Christian theology."¹⁹ This restructuring involves all those aspects of Christianity that are unique to it, such as the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. They are to be "de-emphasize[d] and eventually filter[ed] out."²⁰ And when "each of the world's religions . . . [begins] to deemphasize its own absolute and exclusive claim," such claims would "fall into the background and eventually . . . become absorbed into its past history."²¹ Thus will the great cohabitation of all religions come about. Although this proposal amounts to what one critic called a "monstrous shift,"²² it is a bitter pill that needs to be swallowed. Having made the "paradigm shift," pluralists call upon other theologians to cross "a theological Rubicon."²³

In brief, then, pluralists see contemporary theology as analogous to a medical situation. The name of the patient is interreligious dialogue, showing symptoms like religious uniqueness, superiority, and theological

¹⁶ Hick, *Christian Theology of Religions* 62.

¹⁷ John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999) 83, emphasis added.

¹⁸ Hick, *God Has Many Names* 36, emphasis added.

¹⁹ Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* 179.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 17.

²¹ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* 2–3.

²² Gavin D'Costa, *John Hick's Theology of Religions: A Critical Evaluation* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987) viii.

²³ Hick and Knitter, *Myth of Christian Uniqueness* viii.

absolutism. These symptoms are due to an ailment called Ptolemaic theology, a condition that threatens the life of dialogue. The source of this ailment is traced to the a priori, dogmatic procedure of traditional theology. The remedy for Ptolemaic theology and religious superiority, then, consists in opening one's eyes and looking at the fact of other religions. Religious Studies, therefore, will help theologians make the needed Copernican revolution. Administering this medicine will result in some dramatic weight loss to Christian theology; to observers it might even appear life threatening. Nevertheless, Hick boldly administers this bitter pill and consciously attempts to downsize the unique features of Christianity.

Needless to say, it is this flattening out of differences that is the most controversial and problematic part of the pluralistic proposal. This lies at the heart of the conflict between pluralists like Hick and their particularist opponents like Gavin D'Costa and Mark Heim. It is not that these particularists are not concerned about dialogue. It is that they are not willing to filter out their deeply held convictions that are unique to their religious traditions for the sake of dialogue. It is in this context that I must ask some probing questions about pluralists' argument: Is it correct to say that the "ailment" identified as Ptolemaic theology, with its symptoms of absoluteness and superiority, comes about from not taking the data of other religions seriously? Is religious uniqueness the source of superiority such that the uniqueness of religions needs to be deemphasized? If uniqueness is not the source of superiority, how is it that they are always seen together?

Examining the Argument

I begin by specifying the different ways Hick phrases what he means by "empirical or experiential data." When speaking about the need to take other religions and belief systems seriously, Hick specifies this as "the data of the history of religions."²⁴ Understood in this sense, there can hardly be any doubt that such data have helped replace "ill-informed and hostile stereotypes of other faith communities" with "more accurate knowledge and more sympathetic understanding."²⁵ But beyond that, Hick could not mean that other thinkers such as David Tracy, Steven Katz, Ninian Smart, and Francis Clooney, who do not favor leveling off the uniqueness of religions and who refuse to consider their own religion as "one among many," fail to take the history of religions seriously. If anything, empirical data lead Katz to a greater appreciation of

²⁴ John Hick, "The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D'Costa," *Religious Studies* 33 (1997) 161–66, at 163.

²⁵ Hick "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in *Myth of Christian Uniqueness* 16–36, at 17.

differences.²⁶ Since Hick could not be making such an implausible claim, let me consider other possibilities for what he means.

Ptolemaic Theology and Conceptual Isolation

In another place Hick traces the origins of Ptolemaic theology to the conceptual isolation of different theologies. If no religion has seen itself "as constituting one way amongst others of perceiving the divine," he writes, "this is because what each religion says about the Ultimate, the Real, has been developed within its own conceptual world."²⁷ Chester Gillis expands on it: "For virtually all of the first twenty centuries of Christianity, its theology has been constructed within the exclusive framework of its own sense of revelation and its unity with Western civilization."²⁸ To substantiate his point Gillis goes on to give a very questionable reading of the various stages of its development.

Perhaps the best way to examine the truth of the claim that the Ptolemaic theology found in different religions is the result of conceptual isolation is by turning to the Indian subcontinent, where philosophical and religious diversity is not a newcomer. In India, "though there were many different schools and their views differed sometimes very widely, yet each school took care to learn the views of all the others and did not come to any conclusion before considering thoroughly what others had to say and how their points could be met."²⁹ Even if this is an overstatement, the fact remains that a good number of schools did take into account other religions and points of view. Not only did the different Indian systems interact with one another, they even borrowed terms from one another. Where various competing philosophies coexisted in this manner, there is hardly any room for developing one's own system in isolation from others. In the light of this, if Hick's claim has any force, one would expect absolutism to be absent from Indian thinking. But that is not the reality; both inclusivism and exclusivism are found there too.

Take the teaching of Sri Vallabhāchārya who propounded the Śuddha Advaita (pure nondualism) in the 15th century. He says: "In the early part

²⁶ Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University, 1978) 22–74, at 45–46.

²⁷ Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions* 47.

²⁸ Chester Gillis, *Pluralism: A New Paradigm for Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993) 164.

²⁹ Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, 7th ed. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1968) 4. An excellent example is that Mādhvācārya (not to be confused with Madhvācārya), though himself an Advaitin, wrote *Sarva-darśana-saṅgraha*, a compendium of all schools of thought known at the time. This compendium included even the materialist school of the Carvakas.

[of the Veda] Kṛṣṇa appears as the sacrifice, in the later [Upaniṣadic portion] he appears as *brahman*; [in the *Bhāgavad Gītā*] he is the *avatārin* [god in human form], but in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* Kṛṣṇa appears clearly [as himself].³⁰ No prizes for guessing Vallabha's own belonging! He was a devotee of Kṛṣṇa and his devotion to Kṛṣṇa was based, obviously, on *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. It is clear that Vallabhāchārya looked at other systems and scriptures only in terms of the presence or absence of Kṛṣṇa there. Is it any different from the inclusivist Christian theologians who see the presence of Christ in other religions and speak of "anonymous Christians"? This is classical inclusivism, if we follow the terminology of pluralists. Take the case of Udayana, the great Naiyāyika. Expounding the Nyāya system, he presents his work (*Ātmātattvaviveka*) as the "ultimate Vedānta" (*cāramavedānta*) wherein all the other systems of thought, including Advaita Vedānta, are subsumed as preliminary stages of it.³¹ Even among the Advaitins who accept Brahman as the Ultimate Reality, we see the followers of Śāṅkara claiming *nirguṇa* Brahman (Brahman without attributes, sometimes understood as impersonal Brahman) as the Ultimate Reality, whereas for theologians of the Vaiṣṇava school (like Rāmānuja) *saḡuṇa* Brahman (Brahman with attributes) is the ultimate.

Let me turn from classical to modern Hinduism. Swami Vivekananda is known to many Westerners as one of the original proponents of the kind of pluralism advocated by Hick. But this proponent of pluralism had absolutely no hesitation in declaring Buddhism a sect of Hinduism, in fact "the first sect in India."³² The fact that many of the Buddhist teachings flatly contradict Vivekananda's neo-Vēdāntic teachings did not seem to matter to him at all. Elsewhere he says about his "all-tolerant" Hinduism: "Ours is a religion of which Buddhism, with all its greatness is a rebel child and of which Christianity is a very patchy imitation."³³ By no means could that be considered an impartial statement where one's own religion is considered one among others.

If these are clear examples of inclusivism in Indian thought, exclusivism is not absent in the Indian thinking, either. This is seen in those situations where other religions and schools of thought cannot be assimilated into one's own home ground. Śāṅkara, who set out to harmonize the different

³⁰ *Tattvāthadīpanibandha* 38, cited in *The Hindu World*, ed. Sushil Mittal and G. R. Thursby (New York: Routledge, 2004) 28.

³¹ See Wilhelm Halbfass, ed., *Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991) 56.

³² Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 8 vols., Mayavati memorial ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1970–1973) 3:536, cited in Halbfass, *Tradition and Reflection* 52.

³³ *Ibid.* 275, cited in Richard King, "Orientalism and the Modern Myth of 'Hinduism,'" *Numen* 46 (1999) 146–85, at 161.

schools of Indian thought under his theological scheme, was compelled to exclude some. Wilhelm Halbfass observes that for Śāṅkara, the "teachings which appear outside the Veda or side by side with it do not have to be harmonized and reconciled with it; they have to be measured against it, and if they are incompatible, they have to be rejected. Śāṅkara's treatment of the traditions of the Bhagavatas or Pancaratrins leaves no doubt in this respect."³⁴ The same is true of the contemporary neo-Hindu strategy with regard to Muslims and Christians: they are considered aliens because they refuse to be assimilated into the neo-Hindu scheme of things. Similar observations about the absolutist character of Buddhism have also been made by scholars.³⁵

Data as Facts Interpreted in a Certain Way

What Hick means by data, then, turns out to be something other than the awareness of different belief systems, modes of worship, codes of conduct, and so on, that we gain from the history of religions. Two such alleged facts that are repeatedly brought to our attention in most of his writings are that the majority of religious believers belong to the religions of their birth, and that all religions are soteriologically effective. I have qualified them as "alleged" facts because more than acknowledged data from the study of religions, these are best considered as Hick's take on certain facts. I consider them in turn.

Religion Is a Matter of Birth

It is indeed an observable fact that the majority of religious believers belong to the religion of their birth. But this empirical fact carries little philosophical weight unless one considers truth to be a matter of head counting. Hick does not do that. He moves from these data to offer a psychological explanation for the prevalence of Ptolemaic theology. Having been born and brought up in a given religion that has created us "in its own image," it is only natural that we should think of our own religion as superior to all others.³⁶ Although this looks like an explanation, Hick also suggests that this notion be taken only as an invitation extended to

³⁴ Halbfass, *Tradition and Reflection* 59.

³⁵ See, e.g., Jamie Hubbard, "Buddhist-Buddhist Dialogue?: The *Lotus Sutra* and the Polemic of Accommodation," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 15 (1995) 119–36; and Jane Compson, "The Dalai Lama and the World Religions: A False Friend?," *Religious Studies* 32 (1996) 271–79.

³⁶ "The religion creates us in its own image, so that naturally it fits us and we fit it as no other can. And having been thus formed by one of these traditions it seems obvious to us that it is right/true/normative/superior to all others" (Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions* 7–8).

religious believers to engage in a “hermeneutics of suspicion,”³⁷ i.e., to examine the possibility that superiority claims are not due to upbringing in a particular religious tradition.

Considered in this manner, the assumption turns out to be unfounded. Many, if not most, theological writers, especially in the formative periods of different religions (when superiority claims are unmistakable), were not conventional, run-of-the mill believers who took an uncritical stand on a received faith; some were not even born into the religions about which they taught (e.g., St. Paul, the Buddha). On the contrary, these were people whom William James called “religious geniuses” who know religion first hand.³⁸ The great Indian *āchāryas* like Vallabha and Śankara mentioned above also belong clearly to this category. Therefore, a hermeneutics of suspicion seems clearly unwarranted in such cases.³⁹

Soteriological Parity

The other “fact” that drives the engine of the Copernican revolution is soteriological parity or the ability of religions to effect human “transformation from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness.” When the data relevant to such transformation are examined, “world religions seem to be more or less on par with each other. None can be singled out as manifestly superior;”⁴⁰ “it is not possible to establish the unique moral superiority of any one of the great world faiths.”⁴¹

A closer examination of these “data,” however, throws up difficulties. There are theologians who dispute Hick’s formulation of the richly varied concepts of salvation and liberation found in different religions solely in ethical terms or in such abstract terms as transformation of life from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.⁴² Leaving such issues aside, let me focus only on the nature of the criterion. Apart from this criterion being “pretty squashy,”⁴³ if all religions are considered equal on this moral basis, should not that be extended also to nonreligious worldviews? Atheists

³⁷ Ibid. n. 2.

³⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 1958) 8.

³⁹ Hick also uses the fact that most religious believers were born into their religion for a theological argument to support his view that no religion is to be given a uniquely superior position over the others. If God is indeed loving, Hick argues, God could not make the accident of birth a reason for favoring some persons over others. Since this is not directly an argument from empirical data, I do not discuss it.

⁴⁰ Hick, “Non-Absoluteness of Christianity” 30.

⁴¹ Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions* 15.

⁴² This is seen in the plural form used in the very title of Mark Heim’s book, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

⁴³ Ninian Smart, cited in Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions* 76.

and materialists, considered as a whole, do not seem any less moral than the religious. Therefore, applying Hick’s criterion will lead to the conclusion that nonreligious worldviews have as much soteriological efficacy as the religious ones. In other words, using the soteriological criterion, not only are all religions equal, but being religious or not religious is also equal. It makes little difference whether one is a religious believer or not.

Hick seems to accept this conclusion.⁴⁴ But he seems to refuse its implication that if morality is the criterion of religious truth, the truth value of religions is zero, as it rules out not only superiority of one religion over another (as Hick argues) but also the superiority of religion itself. This would undermine his religious realism according to which the religious view of the world is superior (true), although it cannot be *shown* to be so. But “if the humanist ‘faith’ in toto is salvifically effective, why insist that its tenets are false and Hick’s are true . . . ?”⁴⁵ All are on a par.

It seems to me that Hick’s refusal to accept this consequence is at work in his response to a similar criticism by Roger Trigg. Hick puts the criticism in these terms: “Roger Trigg has objected on the ground that it is equally true that someone brought up by atheist parents may well become an atheist, so that the relativity of belief to upbringing does not necessarily support a religious as distinguished from a naturalistic philosophy.”⁴⁶ Then he responds to it saying “But of course it is not intended to do that.” But Trigg’s criticism, as I understand it, is not that the relativity of belief to upbringing does not support a religious philosophy, but that the value of morality (transition from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness) as a criterion of religious truth is zero because “it proves too much.”⁴⁷ Hick cannot claim that morality is not meant to be a criterion of religious truth, in as much as he is using it to judge all religions to be on par.

Interim Conclusion

Having examined different versions of the argument that Ptolemaic theology comes from not taking the data of religions seriously, I have to conclude that the diagnosis is clearly wrong. It seems appropriate at

⁴⁴ “People of other faiths are not on average noticeably better human beings than Christians, but nor on the other hand are they on average noticeably worse human beings. We find that both the virtues and the vices are, so far as we can tell, more or less equally spread among the population, of whatever major faith—and here I include *Humanism and Marxism* as major (though secular rather than religious) faiths” (Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions* 13, emphasis added).

⁴⁵ Heim, *Salvations* 29.

⁴⁶ Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions* 8 n. 2.

⁴⁷ Roger Trigg, “Religion and the Threat of Relativism,” *Religious Studies* 19 (1983) 297–310, at 298.

this point to generalize my finding and conclude that theologies, as a rule, tend to be Ptolemaic, such that the standard by which other religions are judged turn out to be based on one's own religious tradition. Other religions are given a place in our theological scheme insofar as they conform to the criterion so derived; if they cannot be accommodated, they are excluded as "pagans," "kafirs," or "mlecchas." But this is not due to lack of knowledge about other religions or to any sort of conceptual isolation. This conclusion leads to the question, If it is not the lack of awareness of other religions that leads to Ptolemaic theology, what is its real source?

TRACING THE SOURCE OF PTOLEMAIC THEOLOGY

This question is important because the remedy of the Copernican revolution was based on an unstated assumption that Ptolemaic theology with its assumed superiority is an aberration, a curable disease. Once Ptolemaic theology is seen as an aberration arising from a neglect of religious diversity, the conclusion follows that this aberration is to be overcome by a more enlightened pluralistic theology. The realization that the diagnosis is wrong makes one suspect that the basic assumption itself may not be correct. If this assumption turns out to be false, it may be that pluralistic theology with its attempts to slay the dragons of absolutism and uniqueness has led us on a wild-goose chase, diverting our energies from pressing on with the important task pluralists set out to do, namely, construct a theology that is suitable for our pluralistic age. Let me explore, therefore, an alternative source that could be the source of absolutism and superiority. A beginning in that direction can be made by examining a suggestion made by Heim.

Superiority and Subjectivity

Heim finds the source of superiority in the nature of philosophical judgments:

Philosophical positions are not opinions but judgments. And . . . we are not in a position to concede that someone else's basis of judgment is superior to ours. Someone else's expertise or information may well be so. Such data enriches and expands the basis for our evaluation. But to acknowledge that others have better values or beliefs *by which to judge* is in effect to adopt their perspective and drop any other.⁴⁸

Heim goes on to add that philosophical positions are definite perspectives, and perspectives cannot be combined; they come one at a time to a customer.⁴⁹ In other words, one's philosophical position is bound to be treated as superior.

⁴⁸ Heim, *Salvations* 137, emphasis original.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 134.

While Heim seems to be on the right track, I would offer one qualification. Only a lived philosophy, and not just any speculation, has this Ptolemaic characteristic. Practically all ancient philosophies are of this kind. Chatterjee and Datta vouch for this character of Indian philosophies. According to them, the followers of a philosophical school in India "lived the philosophy and handed it down to succeeding generations of followers who were attracted to them through their lives and thoughts."⁵⁰ David Tracy finds the same regarding ancient and most medieval Western philosophy.⁵¹ But such is not the case with modern Western philosophy. One thinks of David Hume's treatment of causality. This giant of modern Western philosophy could find no necessary connection between the antecedent and the consequent in his philosophical analysis of causality. But the same man, we are told, would turn to a game of backgammon to divert himself from his philosophical exertions. This would not be possible in a lived philosophy, as playing the game of backgammon inevitably has to take causality for granted. One also thinks of the alleged medieval discussions about the number of angels who can dance on the head of a pin. When philosophy is understood in this manner as an activity divorced from the philosopher's life, it need not be considered superior or singular; it could be a great tool for the sharpening of the mind, but not something that one lives by. On the other hand, when philosophy is understood in the sense of lived thought, it will always possess a singularity, and it will be the standard by which others are judged.

It was the same impulse to have one's thinking attuned to life that made Søren Kierkegaard revolt against "objective" thinkers like Hegel who leisurely go through the process of approximating to the one final megatrueth. Consumed as he was with the all-important question of living a Christian life, Kierkegaard had no time for the approximation process. He contrasted such speculative thinking to the writings of a clerk who writes what he himself cannot read. Opposing such thinking, he challenged his contemporaries to appropriate even a bit of truth they possess and be converted, a process that he called "subjective thinking."⁵² Appropriation is a process of self-transformation that is inseparable from the person of the knower, whereas approximation is a detached process that is indifferent to the inner life of the knower.

⁵⁰ Chatterjee and Datta, *Introduction to Indian Philosophy* 9.

⁵¹ Todd Breyfogle and Thomas Levergood, "Conversation with David Tracy," *Cross Currents* 44 (1994) 293–315, at 295.

⁵² See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson, completed and introduced by Walter Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1944), see esp. part 2. For an elaboration of Kierkegaard's use of "subjective" and "objective" see Michael J. Matthis, "Becoming Subjective: Kierkegaard's Existential Revolution," *Philosophy Today* 50 (2006) 272–83.

At least three features are involved in Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity. One is an emphasis on the inwardness of individuals qua individuals and their struggles irrespective of the utter insignificance it might have in an objective system (like Hegel's). This can be understood from his example of two people praying: one prays to the true God but in a false spirit; the other prays to an idol but with the entire passion of his or her inwardness. Of the two, Kierkegaard tells us, it is the "idolater" who is really in truth.⁵³

A second feature of Kierkegaardian subjectivity is that the inward passion of the individual provides a unifying structure to one's existence. It is a secret known to every lover that whether eating or drinking, sleeping or waking, the beloved is ever present, and it is in terms of the beloved that every other activity and relationship of one's life comes to be organized. Such is the case with Kierkegaardian subjectivity. "The only reality to which an existing individual may have a relation that is more than cognitive, is his own reality, the fact that he exists; this reality constitutes his absolute interest."⁵⁴ This absolute interest has such an encompassing character that the existing individual attempts to organize his or her entire life (willing, feeling, and thinking) around it. But if it be thought that this unification is a matter of building a philosophical system, we miss the point that subjectivity is a dynamic process of becoming and not a state of being. Kierkegaard is explicit about the impossibility of an existential system because "system and finality correspond to one another, but existence is precisely the opposite of finality."⁵⁵

Both these dimensions of subjectivity (being the source of unity and dynamism) come together in Gadamer's notion of horizon.⁵⁶ A horizon is an encompassing unity, but not static, as it moves with the perceiver. The imagery of the horizon helps us visualize Kierkegaard's distinction between "objective" thinking and "subjective" or existential thinking. The distinction is comparable to that between *objects* and the *horizon* within which objects are seen. Objects come into view within a horizon, but the horizon

⁵³ Ibid. 179–80.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 280.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 107.

⁵⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2002) 302–5. For him, a horizon has the following features: (1) It is not an object, but the background ("range of vision" 302) in which objects come into view ("looking beyond what is close at hand" 305); (2) it is inescapably linked to the perceiver (303); (3) it is the basis on which objects are judged (knowing the "relative significance of everything" 302); and (4) it is dynamic and not static ("moves with us" 304). While I am not aware of anyone else using Gadamer's notion of horizon to understand Kierkegaard's subjectivity, a parallel can be found in Michael Watts, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003) 86.

itself is not another seen object. Objects are many and distinct; the horizon is singular and encompasses all objects. Objects are independent of the subject, but there can be no horizon that is independent of the perceiver.

This visual imagery of the horizon, though helpful to understand the dynamic unity of subjective thinking, is not very helpful toward understanding a third dimension of subjectivity, namely, its emphasis on unity of being and knowing. But this unity is not to be understood as the identity of thought and reality (as in Hegel), which Kierkegaard considered "a chimera of abstraction," an impossibility for any existing individual. Kierkegaardian unity of being and knowing is a matter of *being the truth*, rather than an indifferent knowing at a distance:

Truth consists not in *knowing* the truth but in *being* the truth. . . . For knowing the truth is something which follows as a matter of course from being the truth, and not conversely; and precisely for this reason it becomes untruth when knowing the truth is separated from being the truth, or when knowing the truth is treated as one and the same thing as being the truth, since the true relation is the converse of this: to be the truth is one and the same thing as knowing the truth.⁵⁷

Therefore, if we are to use the horizon imagery to characterize subjective thinking, it must be qualified as a lived horizon, a life world.

Kierkegaard's insight into the unity of knowing and the being of the knower was a feeble shoot of protest planted in the arid lands of modern philosophy that paid no attention to the inner life of the thinker. But in the 20th century it has grown into a mighty forest, a development that illuminates the very nature of human existence as in Heidegger's discussion of "being-in-the-world" and the numerous critiques of the "myth of the given." By using that hyphenated expression, Heidegger introduced a necessary corrective to how modern philosophy understands human existence. Human beings were taken to be worldless egos standing apart from the world as subjects attempting to gaze at objects in the world. As everyone knows, removing the knower from the world introduced the problem of the knowability of the external world, a problem that cannot be solved because it misconstrues the very nature of the being who seeks to know. As opposed to this spectator view, Heidegger tells us that we are constituted by our engagement, our concern. "Being-in-the-world," therefore, is not a matter of being contained like water in a glass or like a tree in the garden. For Heidegger, to be is to be at home: to be related and related necessarily. It is in that process of relating and caring that we constitute ourselves and our

⁵⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity and the Edifying Discourse Which "Accompanied" It*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1947) 201, emphasis added.

world. To say that the world is constituted in the process does not mean that we create the world but that whatever we find there would not make any sense except through our manner of relating to it; we will know a hammer as hammer only by relating to it in that manner, i.e., by using it to hammer. So too we would not be what we are except through our relating to the world.

This infusion of subjectivity into knowing makes epistemology an existential process.⁵⁸ An immediate implication of this is that the human knower does not have a neutral vantage point or a cosmic location from which to view the world in a detached manner. As the world is constituted by our subjectivity, we would always be at its center. “The world as I live in it has myself as an absolute center of coordinates because I am involved in it.”⁵⁹ This location of “I” at the center of the world brings us back to my original point: that the source of superiority is our philosophical standpoint, when philosophy is understood in an existential sense, as lived philosophy, a lived horizon within which all that one views gains significance. Having this horizon, instead of the other one, is possible. But it is impossible to be outside all horizons, taking an impartial, equidistant view of all. Objectivity is possible with regard to objects, but the horizon is not an object. And whatever one’s horizon, it encompasses everything else. My lived horizon, together with the objects that appear within it, make up my world. If an existential horizon has this all-encompassing, singular character, it cannot but be at the center; it is an imperative of any lived horizon, an existential imperative.

There is also a further implication: if it can be shown that theology is first and foremost an existential enterprise, we would have found the real source of theological absolutism and superiority. If the real source of absolutism is the existential character of theology (and *not* the uniqueness of religions), it would be a pointless exercise to undermine the uniqueness of religions. Then we would be able to maintain the uniqueness of religions without superiority, or at least with only that kind of superiority that is unavoidable in having any lived horizon.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ On the application of “existential” to Heidegger’s epistemology, see John Richardson, *Existential Epistemology: A Heideggerian Critique of the Cartesian Project* (New York: Oxford University, 1986).

⁵⁹ Mikel Dufrenne, “Existentialism and Existentialisms,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 26 (1965) 54. But “being at the centre” is obviously not in a mathematical sense: “the friend I see across the road is nearer to me than the pavement under my feet” (Stephen Mulhall, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Heidegger and Being and Time* [London: Routledge, 1996] 52).

⁶⁰ The “unavoidable superiority” here is not a matter of any individual’s attitude to others; a believer may be the humblest of persons. At stake here is the

Theology as Existential

If it was his all-consuming passion for living his faith that led Kierkegaard to discover the importance of subjectivity, more recent thinkers have come to the same conclusion by closely observing and analyzing the manner in which believers use religious language. One such person is Ludwig Wittgenstein. Although he had no particular religious affiliations, he recognized the existential character of religious discourse and extensively elaborated on it. For example:

Suppose someone were a believer and said: “I believe in a Last Judgment,” and I said: “Well, I’m not so sure. Possibly.” You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said, “There is a German aeroplane overhead,” and I said, “Possibly. I’m not so sure,” you would say we were fairly near.⁶¹

He went on to say that in the first case the two were “on an entirely different plane.”⁶² What does this enormous gulf between the two kinds of beliefs—an objective or ordinary matter-of-fact belief like the German airplane being overhead, and a religious one like belief in the Last Judgment—consist in? The difference is that religious truth claims constitute a way of life. According to Vincent Brümmer,

they are “existential” in a way that the truth claims of science are not. It might make sense to say: “It is true that the planet Jupiter exists and is the largest planet of our solar system, but I don’t really care much about that.” It is however, absurd to say that God exists and is the personal creator of the universe, but I don’t really care much about that.⁶³

One can truly believe that the airplane overhead is a German one without that belief affecting one’s way of life in any way; so too with the planet Jupiter. But if one truly believes in the last judgment or in a personal creator, such beliefs cannot but affect the way one lives. Such beliefs are not just one more belief among others; rather, they guide everything else. More recently Charles Taylor observed that religious faiths need to be understood as “lived conditions, not just as theories or sets of beliefs subscribed to.”⁶⁴

inescapability of an existential horizon. A good example of such “humility-superiority” combination is the Apostle Paul. See Caputo’s interesting observation in *St. Paul among the Philosophers*, ed. John D. Caputo and Linda Alcoff (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2009) 2.

⁶¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970) 53.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Vincent Brümmer, *Model of Love: A Study in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Cambridge University, 1993) 18.

⁶⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2007) 8.

It is the same existential impulse that led Paul Tillich to his discussion of religion as “ultimate concern.”⁶⁵ Heim refers to this same existential character of religion when he talks about the “encompassing nature of faith”:

The extent to which I know my religious convictions and experience condition my *approach to virtually every question* is the same extent to which I can recognize the depth of an alternative. I have no resource so crucial for grasping the *encompassing nature* of a neighbour’s faith as the encompassing nature of my own.⁶⁶

A living faith is indeed one that conditions the believer’s approach to everything else; it has an all-encompassing nature. To be noted is that none of these various thinkers, except Kierkegaard and Tillich, would be considered existentialists. But when it comes to religious faith and theology, they recognize their existential character, indicating that here we are face to face, not so much with the character of the thinkers as with the character of theological thinking itself. But is not existentialist thinking a latecomer in considering this to be a defining feature of theology? This question can be settled by looking at the older ways of understanding and doing theology.

The presence of subjectivity in all three dimensions I have examined can be seen in the theologies of the past. In the first sense, theology is an attempt to illuminate the inner struggles of the believer in the light of faith. This is the reason why very often theologies are found to have an autobiographical dimension. One has only to consider the writings of Augustine to see this point.

But the second and third dimensions of subjectivity are most easily noticeable in theologies. The classical definition of theology, coming from Anselm as “faith seeking understanding,” itself indicates its encompassing character. It operates within a faith horizon. This is what makes theology a very different kind of discipline from the sciences of religions (like sociology or psychology of religion, history of religions, etc.). Sciences seek to describe and explain the observable, objective facts about religions; theology seeks to explicate the horizon of faith within which one already dwells. Theology may also be considered an explanation, but a different kind of explanation from what is ordinarily found in science. One meaning of the word “explain” is to make known in detail, as when we explain the workings of a machine by detailing its components and their functions.⁶⁷ A theological account may be seen as explanation in this sense. As a detailed description of something already taken for granted, theological explanation is a committed inquiry, and its use of reason is within that commitment.

⁶⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (London: Nisbet, 1953), esp. 3:14–15.

⁶⁶ Heim, *Salvations* 1, emphasis added.

⁶⁷ Peter Clarke and Peter Byrne, *Religion Defined and Explained* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1993) 30.

The Indian theologian Śāṅkara, for example, did not consider the use of what he called “dry reason” (*śuṣkatarka*) appropriate for his work; to use Kierkegaard’s language, that would have been “objective” thinking. Theological reasoning, for Śāṅkara, had to be in accord with the scriptures (*śrutyānuṅghīta tarka*), within the faith-horizon.⁶⁸ In the words of Raimon Panikkar, theologies—whether Eastern or Western—“have a given basis: They are efforts at intelligibility of a given religious tradition and generally within that tradition itself.”⁶⁹ Such rootedness within a faith horizon gives theology its existential character.

Theology in the third dimension of subjectivity attempts to bring together knowing and being. Theological giants have always insisted that “theology is to be done on one’s knees,” emphasizing the integration of the theologian’s heart and head, spiritual input and intellectual output (theology). The same is true of Śāṅkara’s theological method, which involves the three steps of *śravaṇa* (listening to the Scriptures), *manana* (cogitating), and *nidhidhyāsana* (meditating over and over on a passage in the Scriptures so that it becomes personalized). To be sure, there have been times when knowing and being (theology and spirituality) have tended to go their separate ways, but theology—both in principle and in the practice of its stalwarts—has always insisted on the unity of knowing and being. We can conclude, then, that theology is existential by its very nature.

If theology is existential by its very nature, and existentialist thinking (as opposed to objectivist thinking) cannot but be rooted in what one takes to be true, it is easy to see that the source of the so-called absolutism in theology comes from its existentialist character.

Implications

That theology is by nature existential is a momentous conclusion with important consequences. First, it enables us to see clearly the crucial distinction between an objective study of religion and a theological study of religion, between what Śāṅkara calls “dry reasoning” and reasoning that is in accord with revelation. The distinction is that theology is constituted by the threefold subjectivity I have examined above. This leads to the further conclusion that theological absolutism is inescapable, although “absolutism” does not seem the right name for it. But for the moment I will continue to use this terminology.

Second, whether one calls it “theological absolutism” or some other name, the point is that theology, if it is theology—i.e., if it is an attempt to articulate an encompassing horizon—will always be Ptolemaic. But this

⁶⁸ *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* II.1.6, cited in Halbfass, ed., *Tradition and Reflection* 156.

⁶⁹ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1978) 34.

expression is a complete misfit because the supposed astronomical parallel does not hold in theology at all. Unlike in astronomy, the source of the so-called Ptolemaic theology is not lack of knowledge, but its existential or earth-bound character.

This conclusion about the earth-bound character of theology is momentous because it undermines the most basic assumption behind the attempts to replace the so-called Ptolemaic theology, the assumption that theological absolutism or home-centeredness is a historical accident or a rectifiable moral flaw. For Hick, theological absolutism is something that has accidentally happened over the centuries, a historical accretion⁷⁰ that is to be chipped away, a harmful sedimentation that he is fond of linking to such evils as imperialism and colonialism. Similarly, although Knitter has come to explicitly acknowledge that historically all religious traditions have been absolutist, he still considers absolutism a matter of “cultural and geopolitical development” that can be overcome.⁷¹ It is this basic assumption that is being undermined when the source of absolutism is recognized as the existential character of theology. This is a third implication.

What is more, such subjectivity is found not only in theology but also in any lived philosophy or existential horizon. It exposes the “myth of the neutral observer.”⁷² If any lived philosophy is absolutist in this manner, it should come as no surprise that the pluralistic position is itself absolutist. This is a fourth implication, and this point has been made by particularists like Heim, who charges that pluralists assume the same superiority with regard to other positions that they disapprove in theology:

It is clearly stated that those without a pluralistic understanding of their faith stand urgently in need of fulfilment and enlightenment. Without such conversion they and their traditions are at least latent threats to world peace and justice, morally dangerous as well as theologically wrong. Oddly enough, these opponents of religious claims to superiority see no hope, not only for the Christian tradition but for all other religions and the world itself, unless their [i.e., pluralists'] views prevail.⁷³

Further, “pluralism repeats the dynamic of the strong exclusivism it opposes: those who disagree are not rational or not worthy or both.”⁷⁴ In other words, pluralists do not tolerate opposition to their view.

Hick responds to this kind of criticism by saying that his pluralism is “not another historical religion making an exclusive religious claim, but a

⁷⁰ Hick, *Interpretation of Religion* 2.

⁷¹ Paul F. Knitter, ed., *The Myth of Religious Superiority: Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2005) vii.

⁷² Eric O. Springsted, “Conditions of Dialogue: John Hick and Simone Weil,” *Journal of Religion* 72 (1992) 19.

⁷³ Heim, *Salvations* 102.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 143.

meta-theory about the relation between the historical religions. Its logical status as a second-order philosophical theory or hypothesis is different in kind from that of a first-order religious creed or gospel. And so the religious pluralist does not, like the traditional religious exclusivist, consign non-believers to perdition.⁷⁵ One is "a self-committing affirmation of faith and the other a philosophical hypothesis."⁷⁶ Knitter makes a similar distinction between "first-order theology" and "second-order theory of dialogue."⁷⁷

It is legitimate and useful to make such a distinction; it can help move forward the discussion between pluralists and particularists. But it is hardly a response to the real issue of whether one can stand outside all lived horizons and have a neutral vantage point from which to judge other standpoints.⁷⁸ If absolutism is understood as meaning that one's own position is the ultimate standard by which everything else is judged, then pluralism is as absolutist as any other position. If exclusivism is understood as the view that one's own stand is right and others' wrong, then pluralism is as exclusivist as any other. Of course, exclusivists differ on what they are exclusive about. But the differences are not so glaring as to make the term appropriate for labeling only one group and not others. All are exclusive about what each thinks is best for human beings. Pluralists like Hick think that the unique features of Christianity (and other religions) have nothing to contribute to human well-being, whereas particularists think otherwise. The two cannot but exclude each other.

Toward a New Map

This exchange reveals the polemical character of the very terms in which the discussion is carried out. Having misunderstood the source of theological absolutism, not only have pluralists deluded themselves into thinking that it is a curable disease; they have also drawn a map of the whole terrain

⁷⁵ Hick, "Possibility of Religious Pluralism" 163. See also John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and the Divine: A Response to Paul Eddy," *Religious Studies* 31 (1995) 417–20, at 418.

⁷⁶ Hick, "Possibility of Religious Pluralism" 163.

⁷⁷ Paul Knitter, "Theocentric Christology: Defended and Transcended," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 24 (1987) 41–52, at 45.

⁷⁸ One should not expect this response to address the issue of whether one can stand outside of all horizons either, because D'Costa's original criticism, in response to which Hick makes the distinction between first-order theology and second-order theory, was not in terms of the existential character of theology. Unfortunately Schmidt-Leukel did not respond to Heim's rather explicit criticism, though he seems to be aware of it; see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism: The Tripolar Typology—Clarified and Reaffirmed," in *Myth of Religious Superiority* 13–27.

of the relationship between religions in such a misleading manner that discussion reaches the kind of dead-end where pluralists and their particularist opponents find themselves today, as reflected in Hick's lament with which I began this article. But the realization that the source of theological absolutism is its unavoidable existential character (the existential imperative) enables us to redraw the map in a way that can lead us beyond the present impasse and reengage the real issues rather than attempt the impossible task of trying to change the existential character of theology.

A first step in the direction of redrawing the map consists in replacing the misleading signboards like "absolutism," "inclusivism," and "exclusivism." I have been using "absolutism" as shorthand for what pluralists have labeled "inclusivism" and "exclusivism," labels that they use for all theological positions other than their own. Such labels are inappropriate because pluralists, as we have seen, are exclusivists in their own way. "Absolutism" is also inappropriate for other reasons: it carries the unsavory political connotations that are unsuitable for a theological position. It also has the philosophical connotation of a fixed, unchanging point of reference that is not called for in theology. What theology requires is merely an existential home, a dynamic horizon, not a fixed, mathematical Archimedean point of reference. "Ultimacy" is better suited for this purpose than "absolutism." Using this term would enable us to acknowledge the ultimacy of pluralists' own position as well as that of particularists without the polemical tone of their conversation.

A further reason for considering the use of "absolutism" inappropriate is its polemical tone, in that it prevents us from appreciating what is positive about the so-called exclusivism and inclusivism (from which pluralists seek to distance themselves). Once the polemics are undermined, we begin to see that the so-called exclusivism may be merely a manifestation of the inescapability of an existential horizon. Exclusivism, understood in this sense, reflects one's conviction regarding the efficacy of the path one has found (in the case of particularists) or the truth of one's stand (in the case of pluralists), a conviction that leads to the affirmation that one's path is also good for others, that without it others would be missing something very important.⁷⁹ Not only pluralists and particularists, but anyone who becomes aware of the singularity of a lived horizon should have no difficulty acknowledging this kind of exclusivism. While this kind of exclusiveness is built into the very notion of an existential horizon, the horizon itself need not be static.

Seen in terms of the existential imperative, the so-called inclusivism is a kind of enlightened ignorance or mysterious enlightenment. It is enlightened

⁷⁹ This positive take on exclusivism ignores those fringe groups that arrogantly condemn other religions. I thank Daniel Madigan for making me aware of it.

in as much as it knows the efficacy (or truth) of one’s path. But it knows not only the efficacy of one’s path but also that the nature of the religious reality (God, nirvana) is so good that no one is to be deprived of it. It even sees in the lives of some who do not follow my path, fruits similar to what I would normally expect to find in those who do follow my path. This leads to a puzzlement, which is then overcome by postulating that the same divine reality is active in ways unknown to me or, perhaps, even to them. In this sense inclusivism is a profession of the mysterious ways of the divine.⁸⁰ This way of understanding inclusivism explains why Vallabhāchārya sees the presence of Kṛṣṇa in the Vēdas and the Vēdānta, in the Gīta and the Purānas; this explains why Karl Rahner finds anonymous Christians in other religions. The enlightened ignorance of inclusivism is an honest way of keeping the integrity of one’s existential horizon (which is a religious one) together with the recognition of the other as other, an acknowledgement that there are others with existential horizons different from my own. As a result, inclusivism has a built-in tension. To the extent that one’s lived horizon is always ultimate, Vallabhāchārya cannot but find the clearest manifestation of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, and the New Testament writers cannot but find their testament as going beyond the “Old.” On the other hand, to the extent that horizons are dynamic, they remain open to further developments. Whether this tension can be resolved, needs to be resolved, and how are matters beyond the scope of this article.

Once we begin to differentiate ultimacy from absoluteness and recognize the source of theological ultimacy as its existential character and not religious uniqueness, it also becomes possible to uncouple uniqueness from superiority. Recall that the need to deal with other religions without superiority was the original motive that led pluralists to question uniqueness. This concern is indeed legitimate and praiseworthy. But undermining uniqueness will not be needed to achieve that goal if uniqueness is disentangled from superiority. One is then left free to appreciate the uniqueness of religions without having to eliminate it to gain parity with other religions. But this will be a uniqueness that is discovered rather than dogmatically postulated.

It is in discovering the uniqueness of religions that the history of religions, with its scholarly and comparative approach, can play an invaluable role. If the classification of interreligious relations into exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism was a rhetorical device meant to show the superiority of pluralism, then showing the untenability of the pluralist argument and providing a positive understanding and appreciation of all three positions should enable us to go beyond that classification and look for more tenable and suitable ways of meeting pluralists’ concern for a “level playing

⁸⁰ I thank John Borelli for helping me arrive at this view of inclusivism.

field” in interreligious dialogue. While that task remains to be done, my aim here is to pave the way for this task by removing the polemical sting from the discussions. I hope this has been achieved by defining a position that is able to recognize and appreciate the leading insights of all three positions—inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism.

Pluralists and the Theological Imperative

At this point a historical question cries out for an answer, without which this article would remain incomplete: If an existential horizon is unavoidable and cannot be one of the objects found within the horizon, how could it ever occur to theologians like Hick and Knitter that religious ultimacy (which they thought of as absolutism) is a historical accretion to be overcome? The answer lies partly in some of the reasons Hick gives for his theory—some typical developments in the West, such as the alliance between colonialism and Christianity.⁸¹ This explains, at least in part, why pluralists should think of Christian uniqueness in terms of superiority.

But the most important reason that leads Hick and Knitter to think of religious ultimacy as a drawback to be overcome is something not explicitly mentioned by either of them as a reason for their position, but it is always a part of Hick’s thinking: the secularization of the West. The so-called European Enlightenment not only brought an end to Christianity as the only available existential horizon; it also called into question the very viability of *any* religious horizon. Propelled by centuries of religious wars and exposed to radically different kinds of religions from other parts of the world, Enlightenment thinkers grew suspicious that all religions were merely human creations. This part of the story is well known and has been told in detail. What often goes unnoticed and unsaid is that the birth of the modern naturalistic outlook was more than the birth of a nonreligious horizon; it was the opening up of the possibility of an option regarding one’s existential horizon. If some version of Christianity was the only socially available existential horizon—what Peter Berger called “the sacred canopy”⁸²—the modern period made diverse canopies available, both sacred and secular.⁸³

Along with the birth of diversity, something else was taking place at the same time, namely, the birth of religion as an object. Religion now comes to be seen as a type with many tokens or instances, an object to be studied

⁸¹ For a special instance of this aggression, see Antony Copley, “The Conversion Experience of India’s Christian Elite in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Religious History* 18 (1994) 52–74.

⁸² Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1973; originally published as *The Sacred Canopy* [1969]).

⁸³ See Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Taylor defines secularity in these very terms.

like any other object.⁸⁴ While this development gave birth to the science of religions, religion did not cease to be an encompassing horizon. Except for a few thinkers who had adopted a naturalistic outlook as one's existential horizon, Christianity (and, increasingly, some other religions—Buddhism, for example), continued to function as lived horizons for most people. Thus, two distinct ways of understanding religion emerge: religion as an object and religion as an existential horizon. Accordingly, two different ways of studying religion emerge: the science of religions and theology.

But even those who saw religion as an object to be studied did not dispense with all lived horizons. Although modern thinkers were victims of such an illusion, existentialists have made us realize that it is impossible to live in a no-man's land devoid of all lived horizons. This is the existential imperative. What naturalists did was not the impossible task of forsaking all lived horizons but of adopting a horizon where religion was no longer a lived reality, but only an object of curiosity. But the very existence of the existential imperative was not widely recognized until recently,⁸⁵ and pluralists seem to have been victims of the modern objectivist illusion (the "myth of the neutral observer" who does not need an existential home) as much as other modern thinkers. The pluralist denial of religious uniqueness and theological ultimacy, then, is a product of diverse factors coming together—the alliance of Christianity and colonialism leading to the conflation of the notions of ultimacy, uniqueness, and superiority; secularization of society and the birth of the sciences of religions; and the modern West's obliviousness to the existential imperative.

If the existential imperative (need for an encompassing horizon) is inescapable, the contemporary world offers different ways of fulfilling this imperative. A lived horizon in the contemporary world could take several forms: secular (religion becomes one option among others); naturalistic (the religious option is ruled out); or religious. Regardless of which horizon is adopted, the others appear as objects within that lived horizon. Both naturalists and secularists see religion as an object, but the latter are more tolerant of it than the former and may be more tolerant of one religion than of another. So too for the theologian who has made his or her religious faith the encompassing horizon: all other religions, as well as naturalism and secularism, appear as objects within that faith horizon.

⁸⁴ Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, ed. Michael L. Peterson (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001) 4.

⁸⁵ In the Continental tradition of philosophy, Heidegger and Gadamer made us aware of the existential imperative. In the analytic tradition, this awareness came about through the use of rigorous logic in epistemology; this, however, led to the realization that foundationalist epistemology, a version of the modern objectivist illusion, is indeed an illusion.

Theologizing in such a context is tricky. Inasmuch as the theologian sees other religions as objects, he or she must take the sciences of religions seriously. But for the sciences, not only are *some* religions objects to be studied; *all* religions are objects to be studied, including the theologian's own religion. As a scholar, the theologian accepts this. One could call this need for objective study the empirical imperative of theology in the contemporary world. Tracy puts this imperative well, when he writes of the need to take into account the "secular standards for knowledge and action initiated by the Enlightenment,"⁸⁶ to obey certain "methodological canons," and "to follow the evidence wherever it may lead."⁸⁷ On the other hand, the theologian has adopted a religious horizon as his or her own, lives within it, and attempts to appropriate it and articulate that appropriation. We could call this need of the theologian to adopt, appropriate, and articulate a religious horizon the theological imperative, understood as a particular version of the existential imperative.

Thus the theologian has to submit to the opposing pulls of the two imperatives. If the empirical imperative demands that the theologian stand apart from his or her religion to study it objectively, the theological imperative calls for commitment to that religious horizon. It is not that the two cannot be reconciled. If the two imperatives are to be reconciled, the seeming contradiction between them must first be recognized. That alone will prevent the theologian from attempting the impossible task of having to consider *his or her own* religious horizon an object ("one among many").⁸⁸ Once this impossibility is recognized, the tension between the empirical and theological imperatives will also be recognized as a contemporary manifestation of a perennial tension that theology has always faced: between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, the religious insider and outsider, first-order theology and second-order theory of religions—in short, the tension between religion as an object and religion as a lived horizon. Seen thus, we can learn from a great thinker like Thomas Aquinas to see how these conflicting imperatives can be reconciled in a viable manner. It may be recalled that one of the roles he gave philosophy was that of a propaedeutic to first-order theology such that neither can be subsumed into the other. I suggest that pluralism can be seen in similar terms, except for Hick's penchant to tailor his theological cloth to suit his

⁸⁶ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 8.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 7.

⁸⁸ A lived horizon, by definition, is not an object within that horizon. It is therefore impossible to make one's own horizon an object in that horizon. When a horizon becomes an object, it will be an object in another horizon. Thus, I can easily recognize that others might have horizons different from mine, but their horizon will not be mine; rather, they would appear as objects in my horizon.

philosophy. I have considered this question elsewhere, although the relationship between philosophy and theology calls for a more detailed treatment than I accorded it.⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

The so-called Ptolemaic character of Christian theology, I suggest, is therefore not a dark spot that can be illumined by the empirical knowledge of other religions; it comes from the existential necessity of having a lived horizon. Empirical study of religions is rooted in the modern secular horizon where religions appear as objects within that horizon—to be studied like any other object. Theology is rooted in a faith horizon that encompasses everything else and where all else (including secularism and other faith traditions) appears as objects within that horizon. The two horizons are clearly different. But the recognition that the two are different does not make the task of contemporary theology any easier, as it needs to maintain the tension between the science of religions (empirical imperative) and theology (theological imperative), with neither undermining the other. It seems to me that pluralists’ acknowledgement of the distinction between first-order theology and second-order philosophical theory opens up the possibility of holding the two orders together, if only this distinction and the relationship between them is explored further. Although I cannot enter into this question here, I have suggested that Aquinas’s way of relating philosophy and theology could offer a resolution.

⁸⁹ George Karuvelil, “Religious Pluralists: What Are They Up To?,” *Journal of Dharma* 35 (2010) 3–22.