

Dealing with Religious Diversity

One approach to the Philosophical issues of religious diversity:

- Regard the cognitive portions of religions as worldviews or metaphysical systems.
- Compare and evaluate these cognitive portions as one might compare and evaluate differing ordinary opinions or alternative scientific theories about the same phenomena.

Some might suggest that the problem with this approach is that the worldviews of religions claim to be *totally comprehensive*. How can such views be evaluated or even compared with one another, let alone criticized or refuted? Some of these religions maintain that the only sorts of reasons that can count for or against any worldview must be reasons that derive from *their own* worldview. What does one say to those who take this position?

One reply to this difficulty is to argue that, in order to compare and evaluate worldviews, *more general criteria* are needed than would be used to evaluate ordinary opinions or even scientific theories. These criteria may be not as decisive as those we use to evaluate ordinary opinions, and the use of them does not put an end to all honest disagreements, but it would be some progress if use of these criteria showed that several religions are about equally reasonable. Perhaps a position between exclusivism and inclusivism could be staked out by using this strategy.

The criteria for assessing the plausibility of worldviews would include the following:

- Scope
- Precision
- Compatibility with other well-established facts
- Logical consistency
- Not self-refuting
- Coherent
- Relatively simple
- Free of *ad hoc* hypotheses
- Fruitful in explanatory power
- Usefulness in ordinary life

Use of such criteria as these may not pick out exactly one religion as most adequate. But it would be some progress if they enable us to conclude that some religions measure up better against these criteria than others do. It would provide some grounds for a rational approval of some religions and of rationally disapproving of others. Would that not be an improvement over blind, irrational attachment to some religions and blind, irrational hatred of others?

One difficulty with his approach to religious diversity, emphasized by exclusivists, is that it will need to deal with the fact of very sharp disagreements between many religious worldviews.

Just as with differing ordinary opinions, or alternative scientific theories, even if we find that several of them are about equally reasonable, it may still turn out that these can't all be true because they contradict one another on certain key points.

The fact of sharp differences give some plausibility to exclusivism.

But inclusivists may claim rational support for their side by calling attention to what may be broad areas of agreement and similarity between many or even most religions.

- the reality of the unseen
- broad ethical ideas
- the need of humanity for transformation
- basic correspondence of some central concepts

Inclusivists will maintain that these similarities among religions justify the hope that religions will not only find areas of mutual compatibility between worldviews but that, by focusing on them there will be an improvement in mutual understanding and all religions may be transformed and made truer and better.