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WHOSE OBJECTIVITY? WHICH
NEUTRALITY? THE DOOMED QUEST FOR
A NEUTRAL VANTAGE POINT FROM
WHICH TO JUDGE RELIGIONS

I

There is an impasse in the discussion as to how to judge a religion other than one’s own. On the one hand judging another religion by the criteria and standards of one’s own tradition has become a highly problematic exercise. The metaphor used by some critics for such an approach is that of jingoistic flag-waving. Criticisms of this strategy are numerous and interdisciplinary in their nature. For instance, it is argued that such an enterprise is part and parcel of the political–economic imperialism of western (Christian) history. Such geo-political–religious imperialism is intolerable in a post-colonial age. Sociologically, anthropologically, and philosophically it has been argued that disparate traditions are quite simply incommensurable, each operating with their own rules and grammar. Hence, to judge one religion against another is like judging the goodness of an apple against a vacuum cleaner. The degree of incommensurability varies, so that at the lower end of the scale, the appropriate analogy is that of judging the goodness of apples against oranges. Such criticisms involve a range of disputed questions such as the possibility of successful translation of one language into another alien and different language, the epistemological logocentricism of western philosophical thought, and so on. I should state before proceeding that despite such criticisms I am a supporter of a nuanced form of this first strategy. I shall return to this point in due course.

If, on the one hand, judging another religion by one’s own is deemed problematic, the alternative has proven equally so. Here it is maintained that it is inappropriate to use criteria from one’s own religion to judge another religion. One may judge another religion by that religion’s criteria alone or one should desist from such a task altogether as it is conceptually impossible. However, critics point out that if one judges another religion purely by its own criteria then the whole problem of conflicting truth claims is bypassed which was in fact the reason for trying to find criteria for judgement. Judging religions by their own criteria may be helpful in some contexts, but it takes us no further in trying to arbitrate between two rival

religious claims. Critics also point out that total incommensurability is self-defeating and such relativism is finally conceptually indefensible. Such relativism effectively ghettoises religions by emasculating any public relevance they may claim. In response, relativising the relativisers means that those who stipulate against religions making judgements on other religions commit the very error they are opposed to by carrying out judgements on all religions.

Stalemate? There are two other options. One would be to question the necessity of such a task and re-centre attention on more pressing issues such as poverty and hunger, political exploitation of women and minorities, child abuse, and the global destruction of parent earth (an inverse form of child abuse). This could be labelled the liberationist/pragmatic strategy that moves the focus away from conflicting doctrines and truth claims and tries to focus on common social and environmental problems. While the agenda is unquestionably urgent, such a pragmatic strategy does not really circumvent the problem. Questions of 'justice' and 'virtue' are involved in addressing such social and moral problems, and inevitably critiques of a tradition other than one's own, as well as one's own, will be required in trying to eradicate 'child abuse' or 'exploitation' of women. Hence, such a strategy meets the same difficulty, for most religions circumscribe their world and thereby define the activities that can and should go on within those boundaries. Religions are not just doctrinal entities, but traditions which fuse and hold together doctrine, practice, liturgy, ritual and so on. Philosophically, such an emphasis on morality as the uncontroversial bridge to avoid the impasse described above stems from an impoverished form of Enlightenment natural ethics which assumes incontestable universal moral norms that would be adhered to by all sensible persons.¹ It should also be said that such a pragmatic approach is sometimes suggested by those who are frankly indifferent to religions and essentially wish to impose a humanistic agenda homogeneously upon all religions.

So what of the fourth option which could deliver us from this impasse? This strategy is subtle and interesting and in limited respects a variant on the above. It is also deceptively straightforward. It is the path of neutrality. Find neutral, commonly acceptable criteria which could not sensibly be rejected by any thinking adherent of any religious tradition. Apply these criteria and one will find a way through the impasse and provide a basis for judging true from false religions. Utopian? Just such a strategy has been suggested by two philosophers of religion: Keith Ward and Harold Netland in *A Vision to Pursue* and *Dissonant Voices* respectively.² Ward and Netland could not, of course,

¹ See J. Milbank, 'The end of dialogue', in G. D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* (New York: Orbis, 1990), pp. 174-91.

² K. Ward, *A Vision to Pursue. Beyond the Crisis in Christianity* (London: SCM, 1991); H. Netland,

refer to each other's work, but one might expect from both of them a consensus on criteria, or at least an agreement in principle with each other's criteria. It would be less fair to expect agreement on the outcome of the application of their criteria for this of course would be quite a complicated task. However, when we turn to their two books we find something surprising, although perhaps quite predictable. Not only are their criteria very different, but Ward suggests all religions would achieve worthwhile scores and thereby supports a form of pluralism (p. 191f), while Netland on the other hand suggests that Christianity alone 'satisfies the requirements of all the ... criteria' (p. 193) and hence, alone amongst the traditions, is true. Such an outcome should alert us to the inherent problem in such allegedly neutral strategies. What I wish to do is critically examine each of their proposals to show that such strategies are futile. In so doing, I will be implicitly arguing for a version of the first position outlined above.

I also hope to show the truth of two axioms. The first is that *in relation to the increased specificity of an alleged neutral proposal its neutrality diminishes*. The second is that *in relation to the decreased specificity of an alleged neutral proposal its usefulness diminishes*. The underlying logic of these two axioms is that whatever criteria are specified they are always and necessarily tradition specific. To give them the status of tradition-transcending robs them of the specificity that ensures their critical cutting edge. And the degree to which they have a critical cutting edge, the more they are rendered tradition specific so they cannot be deemed neutral and capable of acceptance by *all* sensible persons. The implication of this claim would be that by definition any claim to break the impasse by means of the neutrality route is doomed to failure because it is illusory.

II

Harold Netland's proposals are advanced in an interesting defence of Christian 'exclusivism' (there is no salvation outside faith in Christ). I do not wish to discuss Netland's book here but am only concerned with his allegedly universally acceptable and binding proposals for determining the truth or falsity of competing religious worldviews.³ Netland's proposals come after a convincing and robust criticism against relativist strategies (mainly Hick and Knitter – but he would probably add Ward to his list) and less convincing criticisms of fideist strategies. He is dissatisfied with both for their inability to settle questions of truth. He notes that his proposals are not exhaustive and in need of further explication (p. 183), but what he offers is sufficient for discussion. He advances eight principles (P), which are depen-

Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth (Leicester: Apollos/Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 1991). Subsequent references will cite page numbers in the main text.

³ For a discussion of other issues in the book, see my review forthcoming in *Religion*, 1992.

dent on two prior definitions (D) of religion. I quote from his summary (pp. 192–3):

D1: *p* is a defining belief of *R* if and only if being an active participant in good standing within the religious community of *R* entails acceptance of *p*.

D2: A religion *R* is true if and only if all of its defining beliefs are true; if any of its defining beliefs are false, then *R* is false.

P1: If a defining belief *p* of a religion *R* is self-contradictory then *p* is false.

P2: If two or more defining beliefs of *R* are mutually contradictory at least one of them must be false.

P3: If a defining belief *p* of *R* is self-defeating it cannot reasonably be accepted as true.

P4: If the defining beliefs of *R* are not coherent in the sense of providing a unified perspective of the world, then *R* cannot plausibly be regarded as true.

P5: Any religious worldview which is unable to account for fundamental phenomena associated with a religious orientation or which cannot provide adequate answers to central questions in religion should not be accepted as true.

P6: If a defining belief *p* of *R* contradicts well-established conclusions in other domains, and if *R* cannot justify doing so, then *p* should be rejected as probably false.

P7: If a defining belief *p* of *R* depends upon a belief in another domain (e.g. history) which there is good reason to reject as false, then there is good reason to reject *p* as probably false.

P8: If one or more defining beliefs of *R* are incompatible with widely accepted and well-established moral values and principles; or if *R* includes among its essential practices or rites activities which are incompatible with basic moral values and practices, then there is good reason for rejecting *R* as false.

P9: If the defining beliefs of *R* entail the denial of the objectivity of basic moral values and principles; or if they entail the denial of the objective distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, then there is good reason for rejecting *R* as false.

P10: If *R* is unable to provide adequate answers to basic questions about the phenomenon of moral awareness this provides good reason for rejecting *R* as false.

Before turning to the proposals, it should be noted that it seems odd for an evangelical Christian like Netland, who insists that faith in Christ is required for salvation, to propose such a scheme. It would appear that his exclusivist claim should in fact be that salvation is only granted to those who accept his ten principles and two definitions, for he writes that ‘I should state that the reason I believe one is *justified* in accepting the Christian faith as *true* is because it is the only worldview that satisfies the requirements of all the above criteria’ (p. 193, my emphases) – not apparently, because of who Jesus was and who his community proclaimed him to be. The truth of revelation is subject to the truth of the ten principles and two definitions! But let us turn to his proposals.

Netland acknowledges that regarding his definition D1 (*p* is a defining

belief of R if and only if being an active participant in good standing within the religious community of R entails acceptance of p) there is a difficulty in that religions heatedly debate what beliefs precisely constitute 'defining beliefs', but he does not think this problematic in terms of the overall logic of his proposals. However, it may be argued that it is for the following reasons. Firstly, precisely because within any one religion there is considerable debate as to what its defining beliefs may be, it is spurious to suggest a cohesive and unified referent to the term 'religion'. In this respect there are many Christianities and many Buddhisms, both now and in times past, so that in principle the application of the evaluating criteria would have to be applied to *every possible* manifestation of *every possible* religious tradition before Netland's claim that 'the [*sic*] Christian faith... is the only worldview that satisfied the requirements of all the above criteria' (p. 93) could be seen to be true. While he prefaces this claim that 'although this cannot be argued here' I would maintain that while such a task is in principle possible, in practice it would be virtually impossible. It would require *a posteriori* studies using Netland's principles which to my knowledge has not even been started, let alone suggesting that it could be achieved by a single person in a single lifetime. Hence, while this does not jeopardize Netland's overall aim in principle, it suggests a misplaced confidence in his claiming Christianity to be the winner, on such terms, of the judging competition.

Furthermore, while Netland tends to reify religion into a single unified substance, the interesting philosophical and theological factor is precisely the phenomena of change and transformation within religious tradition. William Christian Snr has shown very clearly that besides holding defining beliefs, religious persons also have the mechanisms by which they control, establish and discern defining beliefs and may in one period change what counts as a defining belief for very good theological or philosophical reasons, without thereby changing or denying the 'same' religious adherence.⁴ The point about this was that even within a unified denomination we can see that there are mechanisms by which it can demote 'defining beliefs' to the status of peripheral beliefs without necessary self-contradiction. Hence, D2 could be rendered tautologous in stipulating that 'A region R is true if and only if all of its defining beliefs are true; if any of its defining beliefs are false, then R is false.' Historically, short of changing religion, in times of credibility crisis regarding a defining belief, religious thinkers would tend to relegate that belief in status, rather than hold it as a defining belief with self-consciousness of its error. Again, this does not bear immediately on the question of neutral criteria, but suggests the difficulty with embarking on any evaluating exercise outside of a tradition-specific starting-point.

Finally, what if the defining beliefs of a religion were avowedly fideistic or relativist and such were their subsequent definitions of 'truth'? In practice, relativism seems to be quite a recent phenomenon amongst liberal western

⁴ W. Christian, *Doctrines of Religious Communities. A Philosophical Study* (Yale University Press, 1987).

educated members of religions, but fideism has a distinguished pedigree within different traditions. Fideistic predestination, for example, is evident in Madhava's theology and in Augustine's later thought. This raises the difficulty of the very definition of religion being non-neutral and acceptable to all, for Netland has concealed in his proposal an unstated D₃: that is, 'Truth is propositional and realist and religions can only define themselves in this way'. Hence, what masquerades as an apparently *neutral definition* of religion is in fact a *prescriptive evaluation* of what constitutes genuine true religion, before we even get to the principles which are supposed to perform precisely the task of discerning genuine true religion. This is hardly a promising start.

Let us now turn to the principles that Netland offers and for the moment grant that the project of defining religion is trouble-free. Netland's first and second principles, which rely on notions of identity, non-contradiction and excluded middle, are a promising start for literate, speculative, self-reflective traditions. (I'm not sure the Azande would subscribe to entering this scheme so that they could be evaluated.) I think that here Netland genuinely isolates tradition-transcending principles which would be acceptable to many literate, speculative, self-reflecting persons in different religions. But without looking at the way in which such principles are applied and used from within a specific tradition, they do not really help in settling disputes over truth, except in discerning muddles. Take two examples. If we apply P₁ and P₂ (if a defining belief *p* of a religion *R* is self-contradictory then *p* is false; and if two or more defining beliefs of *R* are mutually contradictory at least one of them must be false) to a Zen koan, 'listen to the sound of one hand clapping', a koan which is essential as a means to realizing satori, Netland would rule Zen out because such a statement is meaningless in his terms. But Zen Buddhists accept such rules of logic only to show that satori transcends logical conceptuality and definition. A Mādhyamika Buddhist such as Nāgārjuna, who also accepts such rules of logic only to show why no logical system can be held, would also be disqualified by Netland. In fact, Netland may also end up dismissing certain scientists for claiming that light is both a wave and not a wave, or an Einstein for suggesting that the speed at which we observe an object travelling would be both the same and different, depending on our observational position.

The problem here is that these principles do not help in the task of evaluation. One must observe the ways in which they are used within different communities, where such principles may be accepted but are subordinated to more fundamental truths of revelation by which they are regulated. So that while conversation between Netland, Nāgārjuna and Einstein could be possible in accepting the validity of the principle of identity, non-contradiction and excluded middle, the way in which they would each utilize and understand logic would be quite different, yet internally con-

sistent and defensible. Netland is partly aware of this for he notes that some would say that the notions of nirvāna, satori and the Trinity are all contradictory and adds 'whether any of these doctrines is indeed self-contradictory is of course a separate and complex question' (p. 184). But is it a separate question? I think Netland here moves too quickly, for whether they are indeed self-contradictory is established by the way that a specific tradition regards and utilizes these principles. Isolating the principles outside of a particular context does not really get us very far. Recall my axioms: in relation to the increased specificity of an alleged neutral proposal its neutrality diminishes and secondly, in relation to the decreased specificity of an alleged neutral proposal its usefulness diminishes. The latter might be applied to P₁ and P₂ without claiming that they are entirely without merit, although one must acknowledge their limited provenance, namely literate, speculative, self-reflecting persons within religions and their limited provenance, namely subordination to truths of revelation or meditative experience.

Of P₃ (if a defining belief *p* of *R* is self-defeating it cannot reasonably be accepted as true) it may be observed that it amounts to no more than P₁, for 'self-defeating' is by Netland's own definition tantamount to self-contradiction. He writes of self-defeating statements that they 'cannot be true because they provide the grounds for their own refutation' (p. 184) and the example he gives, that of thorough-going relativism being self-refuting, is obviously an example of self-contradiction. P₄ (if the defining beliefs of *R* are not coherent in the sense of providing a unified perspective on the world, then *R* cannot plausibly be regarded as true) amounts to coherence *within* a religious system and as with P₁ and P₂ Netland does, I believe, isolate a tradition-transcending criterion which would be acceptable to most literate, speculative, self-reflecting persons within different religions. As he notes himself, 'coherence of a worldview in and of itself is not sufficient to guarantee truth of a worldview, but lack of coherence does provide good reason for its rejection' (p. 186). It should also be noted that the notions of coherence may vary as we will see below in relation to the notion of 'adequacy'.

P₅ seems to amount to a tautologous criterion for judgement, for it dismisses a religion which is 'unable to account for fundamental phenomena associated with religious orientation' and one 'which cannot provide adequate answers to central questions in religion'. The reason for suggesting tautology here is that 'fundamental phenomena' are not something self-evident to any neutral on-looker who can then judge between different explanations of these same phenomena and then choose the best. Rather, religious world views actually define and select what they perceive to be fundamental phenomena and their very power lies in the answers they give to the type of question they perceive. Take for example the central way in which the question of God is not seen as necessary for enlightenment by the

Buddha and does not need to feature in the notion of dukkha, its cause and the means to remove it. The 'fundamental phenomena' here are radically and differently constructed from those perceived by a Richard Swinburne who in suffering sees the problem of evil because of a belief in a loving God, and must then 'answer' this problem by defending a good and loving God. While Buddhists and Christians share the same physical world it would pre-judge a whole range of questions to suggest they interpret/experience and experience/interpret the world in a common way, implying common fundamental phenomena or even a sense of what counts as an 'adequate' answer to very different questions. Adequacy, for example, is intrinsically a theological and philosophical notion highly dependent on the tradition within which the term is used. For instance, certain Christian critics of free-will theodicies (adequate answers to the question of evil in the face of a loving God, a non-question for a Buddhist) will find the free-will defence entirely inadequate on the grounds that the attempted justification of suffering is un-Christian. Such a position is advanced by Kenneth Surin.⁵ Now defenders of the free-will argument like Swinburne can argue endlessly, but such critics as Surin will *a priori* refuse their overall vision for they have, one might say, incommensurable criteria of adequacy. Critics may try and show why such defences are internally problematic, as does Surin, but ultimately they have different senses of 'adequacy', such that Swinburne will be satisfied with a rationally plausible answer while Surin requires that the answer, if 'adequate', must satisfy the child being burnt to death in the ovens of Auschwitz. Again, Netland is aware of such problems for he writes that 'there is not always agreement concerning just what phenomena fall within the reference range of a religious worldview and what constitutes a satisfactory answer to the basic questions of religion. This fact, however, does not call into question the legitimacy of the criterion itself but simply indicates the difficulty of applying it to particular religious worldviews' (p. 187). But this final sentence avoids the problem, as I have tried to show, for this criterion does not actually mean anything without the specification that Netland seems to think is an entirely separate question. Netland further perpetuates the kind of essentialism about 'religion', the 'world' and 'common questions' in a manner that is quite ahistorical in assuming such cohesive, reified and unitary entities.

P6 to P10 begin to bear features of 'thick' description where tradition specific characteristics are much more obvious and unmask the alleged neutrality of the proposals. P6 and P7 use 'well-established conclusions in other domains', such as science, history and archaeology, upon which to judge the claims of religion, either in the case of direct contradiction (P6) or dependency (P7). The difference between P6 and P7 could be a difference of degree rather than of kind. But that is not relevant, for more importantly

⁵ K. Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

Netland situates his criteria very clearly in a specific tradition. Netland's neutrality is that of the enlightened western secularist where there is a distinct separation between theological 'science' and the historical, scientific and archaeological sciences, each one given sovereign reign within its own field and ever increasingly the latter group given sovereign reign over religious territory. But such presuppositions are very tradition specific. Admittedly with the internationalization of western secular culture many societies and religions are going through some similar fragmentary processes, although it must be noted, they react very differently. For example, in some Islamic thought there is no autonomy granted to secular sciences in the way presupposed by Netland such that religious truth is determined and controlled by secular truths. The same could be said for some forms of Chinese and early Indian thought where 'scientific theories' were actually part of religious worldviews, for example in the evolutionary framework of Sāṃkhya-Yoga where Netland's distinction between science and religion would not make sense, let alone be applicable. And one can also find resurgent within some forms of Christianity a strong resistance to such fragmentation coming from both conservative evangelicals, who oppose scientific theories of evolution, and from radical post-modernists, who oppose scientific notions of history.⁶ Here again, I am not suggesting that Netland's criterion is entirely unhelpful, but that without tradition-specific specification it is unuseable, and insofar as it can be used, betrays its neutrality.

P8 and P9 are perhaps the most blatantly non-neutral and given my first axiom that in relation to the increased specificity of an alleged neutral proposals its neutrality diminishes, it is not surprising that these principles are the ones which might take us on some distance in actually carrying out a process of judgement. P8 states: 'If one or more defining beliefs of R are incompatible with widely accepted and well-established moral values and principles; or if R includes among its essential practices or rites activities which are incompatible with basic moral values and practices, then there is good reason for rejecting R as false.' This unashamedly privileges western secular tastes and sensibilities in deeming religions true in accordance with their conformity to current notions of good taste and decency. Netland seems unaware of the huge and questionable set of assumptions implicit in this criterion. Firstly, he is guilty of the now consistent danger of 'essentialism'; assuming some homogeneous coherence and consensus on moral values, principles and practices. But this begs the question as to which society will Netland turn to find this alleged consensus: the Azande, the Aztec, the Crusader Christians of the middle ages, Tibetan Buddhism before the entry of the Chinese, present-day Saudi Arabia, present-day England, present-day Chicago, or where? And when he has chosen that society, which group's

⁶ See for example regarding the latter, John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

morality is he to take as normative, and what about the plurality of moral values, principles and practices that he will inevitably find? Strangely, Netland seems to ignore such intractable difficulties, but rather cites examples of this allegedly neutral common morality: 'Thus, a religious world view which includes child sacrifice or cannibalism as an essential rite or adopts as a basic tenet the inherent superiority of whites over blacks should, for this reason, be rejected as probably false' (p. 190). These are a curious set of examples, because in present day Chicago and England it would seem that public morality as a whole accepts as a basic moral value the right to choose what the Roman Catholic Church views as 'child sacrifice': abortion. And in certain parts of Protestant Northern Ireland, there are still leaflets circulated where the communion rite of the Catholic mass is seen as cannibalism and 'God's vicar on Earth' as 'Satan's representative'.

The point I am making is this. There are no sets of basic moral values which are neutral and acceptable to all people, and as soon as one tries to specify some their historical and tradition-specific nature becomes evident. Prohibition on suicide in one tradition amounts to martyrdom in another, avoiding meat only on a Friday in one tradition amounts to a six-day species-genocide in the eyes of another. My view does not in itself exclude the possibility of overlap, family resemblances, and so on. However, I would question the possibility that there is a homogeneous neutral publicly acceptable morality. Furthermore, if such an entity were found there seems to be no good reason to advance such a criterion as deciding the truth or falsity of a religion. For nearly all religious traditions the logic operates in the reverse direction. For example, in some forms of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, good and bad are defined from the basis of revelation and certain streams of privileged tradition stemming from that revelation, and this has then often been the basis for criticising the societies in which Jews, Christians and Muslims then find themselves. Netland's P8 suggests a reverse logic which is difficult to defend historically.

P9 has especially interesting results for its specifies that 'if the defining beliefs of R entail the denial of the objectivity of basic moral values and principles; or if they entail the denial of the objective distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, then there is good reason for rejecting R as false'. Here, more than almost anywhere else, the tradition-specific nature of Netland's proposals becomes evident. He gives no grounds for assuming that it is universally acceptable that such a realist view of ethics is the case, or why it is uncontroversial that there is an objective distinction between right/wrong, good/evil. This obvious weakness would allow those groups who do not agree with these assumptions to question (quite rightly given Netland's project) whether such proposals are objective neutral criteria for evaluating religions. One can imagine an Advaitin specifying that any religion that viewed the distinction between evil/good as an objective one could not be

true because it undermines the absolute undifferentiated nature of Brahman, which is of course beyond the provisional duality of good and evil. Netland would no doubt reply that this was rather loading the dice. But oddly, he does the same with a curious air of innocence. Hence, he concludes that a

strong case can be made for the view that Advaita Vedanta Hinduism and Zen Buddhism – insofar as they make a fundamental ontological distinction between levels of reality and truth and maintain that the highest Reality and Truth is absolutely undifferentiated unity, allowing no distinctions whatever – are incompatible with moral objectivity. It is hard to see how Advaita Vedanta or Zen can accommodate an objective distinction between good and evil, right and wrong (p. 190).

and hence they are probably false religions. It is also clear that such a proposal would be far from acceptable to most Advaitins or Zen Buddhists. Needless to say, the battlefield over the question is entirely misconstrued by Netland. He wins, so to speak, on very loaded and pre-judged terms which settle the question of religious truth before it has actually been discussed properly. This hardly overcomes the impasse regarding questions of conflicting truth claims, but rather propounds an answer of neutral criteria which we have seen to be far from neutral.

Little need be said about P10 (if R is unable to provide adequate answers to basic questions about the phenomenon of moral awareness, this provides good reason for rejecting R as false.) As with my criticisms of P5, it must be urged that the notion of ‘adequacy’ is far from clear and involves strong theological and philosophical judgements as to what it constitutes. And as with my criticisms of P5, it must also be asked whether there is any agreed phenomenon of ‘moral awareness’ or whether Netland simply once again creates essences out of a complex multiform phenomenon. Zen Buddhists clearly think that they do provide ‘adequate answers’ and that the ‘inadequate’ answers are given by theists (who are dualists) like Netland and their notions of adequacy are not derived from classical logic, but from the basic experience of satori, which conceptually defies the norms of classical logic.

If Netland’s attempt to frame neutral criteria by which to judge religions is deeply problematic, as I hope to have shown, will Ward’s fare any better? The logic of my criticisms suggests that the answer must be ‘no’ for the two axioms have so far proven true: *in relation to the increased specificity of an alleged neutral proposal its neutrality diminishes and that in relation to the decreased specificity of an alleged neutral proposal its usefulness diminishes.*

III

Keith Ward’s proposals are advanced in the context of his vision of Christianity in the twenty first century. He follows in the tradition of John Hick’s

pluralism, adopting a unitarian Christology and wishing to forge peaceful and harmonious relations between religions by means of overcoming exclusivist Christologies. As with Netland's book, I am concerned solely to assess his proposed neutral criteria by which to judge religions.⁷ Ward suggests that there are 'certain common features of being human' (p. 178) such that it will be possible to specify 'the criteria of excellence which are appropriate to human beings and the nature of the goal which is proper to humanity as such' (p. 179). Hence Ward wishes to establish that there 'is a set of fundamental values which are given by the very nature of human being itself, and which are not merely conventional or matters of arbitrary and wholly subjective preference' (p. 179). Once more, we see a curious logic whereby religions will be told what constitutes their truthfulness in terms of some foundational Archimedes point outside of all religious traditions. This Archimedes point is that of a Kantian form of natural theology.

Ward, like Netland, criticises relativist and fideist positions and sees the way out of the impasse regarding conflicting truth claims in the provision of universal criteria. These are established by conditions for the possibility of reflectively using the concept of 'value'. This allegedly avoids the difficulties of dealing with the very different types of values held, but probes deeper, into the transcendental arguments from the notion of value. Ward notes analogies here with Kant's transcendental arguments for the possibility of scientific and mathematical knowledge. But this analogy should alert us to two possible dangers. Firstly, that in specifying general conditions for being able to hold values nothing specific is said about the content of values and their possible conflicts, which is ultimately the issue at stake. The point is not that every one has and is able to make truth claims, but rather that the truth claims themselves, if taken seriously, often conflict. Second, Kant operates within a very specific tradition and the history of philosophy since testifies to the controversy as to whether he had attained for pure and practical reason the transcending role he claimed for it. There are strong philosophical counter-traditions questioning the entire Kantian project which is germane for indicating the problem of any alleged neutral starting point.⁸

What is Ward's argument? I hope I convey it correctly for at times in his text the different steps and stages are not always clear. Firstly, he argues that the notion of 'value' presupposes preference and choice, and that value, if it is worthy of being sought, must be an intrinsically worthwhile state of consciousness. Secondly, he argues that 'happiness' is a basic value which admittedly 'does not show what sort of conscious state happiness is' (p. 182), and that such happiness can be found in different ways, although one must qualify it by stating that it 'is always wrong to cause sorrow or suffering, in

⁷ See my review of Ward in *The Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 1992.

⁸ See for example, A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edn (London: Duckworth, 1985).

the absence of further justifying factors' (p. 182). Thirdly, to seek to make choices to attain happiness, a further basic value is presupposed: that of knowledge. Hence, with qualifications, it can be said that it 'is an unequivocally good thing to have the capacity to know what can be chosen and how best to achieve it' (p. 184). Knowledge is not simply a grasp of the facts, but a 'deep sensitivity to and appreciation of beauty and order and a compassionate empathy with the sufferings of all creatures' and involves 'an understanding of the nature of things and the explanation for their existence, so far as this is available' (p. 184). Fourthly, choice, happiness, and knowledge presuppose freedom to make such choices. Ward summarises his argument thus: 'if I value anything at all, I have a good reason to value the realization of intrinsically satisfying conscious states, the capacity of knowing which states are actual and possible, of reasoning about how to obtain them, and of being free to realize them. These basic values are presupposed by the analysis of value in terms of rational preference' (p. 186). In order to render this as a universally applicable truth, Ward adds a fifth value, which he calls 'justice; which simply reminds us that whatever is a basic value for us is one for anyone like us in the relevant aspects' (p. 186), meaning that if pursuing the attainment of values is good for x, and all factors being equal for y, then justice requires that it is good for y similarly to pursue the attainment of values.

In keeping with the Kantian transcendental nature of the argument, it should be noted that all Ward has provided (if his argument is correct) are certain formal, rather than material, elements constitutive of human beings as value seeking. Realizing intrinsically satisfying conscious states, knowing about such states, being able to know how to obtain them and being free to do so, are all formal properties of moral agents, specifying nothing whatsoever about the contents of the moral vision they hold. But Ward goes on to say that in so much as these conditions hold, one can claim to have arrived at an 'autonomous', 'objective' and 'absolute' 'standard or test for the acceptability of values. Any values which frustrate or destroy any of the set of basic values are less acceptable than values which, in a particular context, can be seen as encouraging the realization of the set of basic values' (p. 187). But can material choices actually effect the formal conditions required for making choices? Is Ward guilty of a category confusion? I think that he is guilty because what he calls 'the set of basic values' are not actually material choices available, but the conditions for making any material choices. If it is otherwise, then these cannot be transcendental conditions for value-seeking that Ward claims them to be. Precisely because the 'basic set of values' are conditions for choice-making and value-seeking they cannot specify the material contents of choice-making and value-seeking. Hence, they can hardly apply as criteria for granting truthfulness to material choices, but only as stating the necessary conditions for material choices.

In fact it should be noted that even the way in which Ward has specified the transcendental conditions of value seeking human beings is not neutral. For instance, he presupposes some very tradition specific notions of rationality and knowledge. Rationality is defined as 'the capacity to discern the true nature of things and the deepest patterns of intelligibility in the world' (p. 184), a definition which smacks of traditional theistic natural theology. What of the Nāgārjunas of this world, who far from noting that the nature of things constitutes deep patterns of intelligibility in the world, note rather that nothing within this world is properly intelligible and therefore nothing within this world is properly satisfying? The same could be said for Śāṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, for on the ultimate level of truth the world is actually unintelligible (*anirvicānya*) and has no proper status (*māyā*). A similar criticism could be advanced regarding Ward's definition of knowledge which requires an 'appreciation of beauty and order', an aspect of deep illusion according to most Buddhists. And similarly, for Ward's concession that while happiness can admittedly be found in different ways, he would qualify it by saying it 'is always wrong to cause sorrow or suffering, in the absence of further justifying factors' (p. 102). But the notions of 'sorrow' and 'suffering' are in danger of being essentialised (*à la* Netland), for surely such terms are actually defined and have their meaning within tradition-specific contexts, not in a general and universal sense as implied by Ward? Suffering and sorrow, for a Buddhist, constitute the marks of *dukkha* and are part of the nature of empirical existence, whereas within certain forms of Christianity they are not essential to empirical existence and exist as a result of sin. Hence, at one level to be freed of the illusion of God as an essential being is to be freed from suffering and sorrow (within Buddhism), while entirely the opposite could be the case with Christianity. The list of differing constructions and construals given to this term could be multiplied and the point I am making is simple. I wish to stress that there is no neutral language and concepts and hence, even within Ward's formal definition, there is no neutrality. But let us for the moment grant Ward's argument a potential coherence to see how he further slips from stating common *formal* requirements to equating these with common *material* goals, compounding his category mistake.

Having rejected any seeking of values that destroys those absolute values which presuppose the conditions for seeking value, Ward goes on to distinguish between being *merely* human (being capable of pursuing these values) and being *fully* human (realising these values as fully as possible) (p. 188). So where does religion enter the picture? Ward's answer is that the religions all share a common 'structure' which consists 'in a maximal instantiation of the five basic values' (p. 189). But at this level of generality Ward's criteria do not really take us very far in resolving any conflicts concerning 'maximal instantiation', for herein lies the problem of conflicting

truth claims, and he seems to partially recognize this when he adds ‘and one can see how different faiths interpret such a maximal case in different ways’ (p. 189). This amounts to saying that all religions have in common is a desire to achieve a way of life in which adherents are fulfilled and of course this is not saying very much regarding the evaluation of what counts as fulfilling or not. How, for instance, is martyrdom discerned as authentic or inauthentic in the cases of St Peter, the Jonestown disciples, and the followers of Hizballah (the Party of God)?⁹ All persons in the above cases may fully believe that they are achieving a ‘maximal instantiation’ of pursuing that which is most valuable. It is at this point that Ward most clearly jumps the tracks and introduces a concealed assumption that actually negates the thrust of his argument from neutrality.

He begins to argue that while different faiths may interpret maximal cases in different ways, the differences ‘are subtle differences of interpretation’ (p. 189) and have a commonality of content; that is ‘a turning-away from selfishness by relating individuals to a supreme objective value which is their ultimate goal’ (p. 188). Or again, he says ‘there is agreement on the need to move from self towards a supreme objective value and an agreement on the sort of value this will be which forms a deeper structure underlying particular differences of interpretation’ (p. 190). But this is surely a classical case of a category mistake; the confusion of the categories of form and content. Ward simply jumps from assuming a common structure (a movement towards a supreme objective value) to conflating that structure with content, and therefore a common goal. Hence, rather than attempting a solution to the problem, Ward dissolves it by not taking conflicting claims seriously. It is worth quoting at length the following passage which demonstrates this:

It might be better to see the different faiths, not as in radical opposition but as having a range of agreed values, but varying ways of interpreting them in the light of a developing understanding of the world. There is an important sense in which differing faiths are engaged in a common pursuit of supreme value, though they conceive this in diverse ways. The theist will seek to transcend self by achieving a conscious relationship to God which enables her to share and reflect the supreme perfections of God. She seeks to make her will one with the divine will. The Buddhist seeks to transcend selfish desire, to make her nature one with the Buddha nature. The Vedantin seeks to realize her self as one with the Self of all, unlimited being, consciousness and bliss. Is there so much difference here? Are the deep agreements not more important than the countless unresolvable disputes which litter the libraries of professional dogmatists? (p. 190).

Presuming ‘professional dogmatists’ is a term of abuse, I must plead guilty to being such a character, for it seems to me that the reverse of what Ward observes is the case. There seems to be very deep disagreements of content,

⁹ See the useful essay by M. Kramer, ‘The moral logic of Hizballah’, in W. Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 131–60.

even if there is a commonality of structure within different religions. For example (if one can generalize for the moment) the Christian's entire morality and pursuit of supreme value is based on difference and participation, difference from God but finally participation in his love, charity and goodness. Difference, distinction and participation are all upheld as ontological categories by means of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Advaitin on the other hand is entirely orientated towards unity without difference and oneness without duality: the 'experience' of anubhava in which Brahman is realized as the sole existent, one without a second. Not only is the goal different, but so is the entire basis of morality and what counts as the ultimate truth for the Christian and Advaitin. And Rāmānuja and Madhva, as Vedāntins, certainly felt that the errors of Śankara were serious enough to condemn his teachings, to criticise his false understanding of Brahman and thereby the basis of Śankara's ethics. Without even drawing the Buddhist in at this point, and the differences between different schools of Buddhism are considerable, the 'countless unseizable disputes' are far from insignificant. It seems that the deep structure actually testifies to something very different from what Ward sees. Despite various commonalities in formal structure, and perhaps commonalities in values at varying levels of theory and practice, at a fundamental level there are substantial ontological differences that cannot be dissolved. This it should be recalled is the purpose of the exercise: to adjudicate between such differences. But Ward's strategy is to relegate such differences to 'subtle differences of interpretation' and one suddenly realizes that the transcendental argument for the condition of value-seeking has dropped entirely out of sight. And this is not insignificant.

Ward's allegedly neutral path of adjudication is, it seems to me, independent of the conclusions which he draws for two basic reasons. The first is that he commits a category mistake in applying his argument. From a similarity of formal structure, he assumes a common goal. Secondly, the criteria are not in fact neutral for Ward has already decided earlier in the book (and has begun to do so in his earlier work: *Images of Eternity*, 1987) that religions present 'iconic' visions, where 'iconic' plays a similar function to John Hick's category of 'myth'; that is, something is 'revealed' but it cannot be held to be an absolute truth and it must always be open to correction and transformation. Hence, disputes between the ultimate nature of reality can always be relegated to complementary perspectives and not finally taken seriously at all. It is curious that those wishing better relationships between religions and who are anxious to dispose of exclusivist claims, end up inadvertently not respecting the integrity of the different traditions and the seriousness and absoluteness of their claims and thereby erect a new exclusivism.¹⁰

¹⁰ See my analysis of John Hick in these terms in 'Taking Other Religions Seriously: Some Ironies in the Current Debate on a Christian Theology of Religions', *The Thomist*, LIV, 3 (1990), 519-30; and also G. Loughlin, 'Prefacing Pluralism: John Hick and the Mastery of Religion', *Modern Theology*, VII, 1 (1990), 29-56.

IV

I have endeavoured to achieve certain limited goals. Firstly, I have tried to show that the impasse in the problem of conflicting truth claims cannot be met by means of advancing neutral criteria for adjudicating between religions. As has been demonstrated by my examination of Ward and Netland, it can be argued that in relation to the increased specificity of an alleged neutral proposal its neutrality diminishes and secondly, in relation to the decreased specificity of an alleged neutral proposal its usefulness diminishes. In Netland's case we saw that his criteria were either so underspecified as to be incapable of the task, or so overspecified to be obvious forms of tradition-specific (at least theistic) criteria that they could not count as performing the task they were set up to perform. In Ward's case we saw that his criteria were far from neutral and when they actually achieve results in application, they only did so by changing their nature through a category mistake.

Where does this leave us in the impasse regarding conflicting truth claims? Slightly better off I think, in avoiding certain options. In arguing implicitly that one cannot start from other than a tradition-specific starting point I hope to have shown the necessity for pursuing the question along the avenues set out in the first of the options outlined at the beginning of the paper. However, it remains to be shown how one can profitably counter the various objections to such an approach and to argue that this is in fact the only credible way in which to judge religions other than one's own.

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