

## Robert Boyle on the diversity of religions

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**Abstract:** Robert Boyle's treatise, 'On the diversity of religions', remains a little-known work, and was unpublished during his lifetime. Nonetheless it is of considerable historical and philosophical interest. In it, Boyle attempts to answer the question of how one can hope to obtain religious truth amidst the many competing claims to revelation, a concern which had grown acute in the early modern period. In this paper I examine Boyle's arguments, considering along the way their relationship to the various contemporary debates on diversity and evaluating their present relevance.

Robert Boyle's essay, 'On the diversity of religions',<sup>1</sup> is a document of both historical and philosophical interest. Boyle, himself one of the leading philosophical and scientific minds of the seventeenth century, was writing at an interesting time in the spiritual consciousness of the west, a time when the educated were becoming better informed concerning the world's other religions. This information arrived in the form of reports from distant travellers, tradesmen, missionaries, and various others, and came to be widely disseminated in Europe. While the West had always been aware of other religions, through historical documents referring to pagan beliefs, and through contemporary encounters with Islam and Judaism, it was not until sustained contact took place with the New World, and with China and India, that a really strong sense of the diversity of contemporary religions sprung up.

Moreover, Boyle was writing in the context of the English Enlightenment, where a comparatively large degree of religious freedom, combined with a proliferation of Protestant denominations, continued and often vitriolic Catholic-Protestant debate, and the rise of deism, stimulated reflection on the sources of religious truth. It also prompted reflection on the reasons for the existence of the many and varied religious opinions found even within Europe. There was felt a need for Christian thinkers to reassert the truth of the faith over and against the newly discovered variety; the diversity of both living religions and religious views

more generally was now a problem in a way that had not been as acutely perceived before. Of course, it is an issue about which Christian thinkers, and philosophers more generally, are still pondering. In what follows I will provide a brief summary of Boyle's treatise, considering along the way its relation to other contemporary works on the problem of diversity, and asking to what extent his arguments can be thought to carry any weight in our own day.

But before getting into exegesis, I should say a bit more about the text itself. The full title, which appears on the first page of the text but not on the initial leaf of the manuscript, appends the following: 'That a wise Christian should not be disturbed by the number and diversity of religions'. The text is among Boyle's unpublished works, and remained in the Boyle Archives of the Royal Society until it saw the light of day in the recent Hunter and Davis edition of the *Works*. Consequently, the treatise has received little attention even from Boyle scholars. It was originally written by Boyle in English, and a substantial portion of that version survives, but the full manuscript is preserved in the archives only in a Latin translation, one probably made by David Abercromby. The remainder of the English translation is provided by Hunter and Davis. The precise date of the work's composition is uncertain, but portions of it at least must date from before 1684, since a treatise on this topic is listed in an inventory of Boyle's papers dated 10 July of that year.<sup>2</sup>

Boyle begins the treatise by outlining the type of argument his essay is contending against. It is this:

In other words, if we consider how many nations there are in the world, with so many millions of men in them divided into the four great sects, namely Christian, Jews, Mohammedans and pagans, each of which is subdivided into several different systems of belief, and if we further consider with what assurance each one puts faith in its own religion and cause – if, says he, we bear these things in mind, then no man of prudence or moderation will imagine that, surrounded by such a variety of opinions and warring sects, each with learned men amongst its followers, he is at all likely to embrace the one and only true religion, especially when everyone maintains that his religion is true, and all acknowledge that there is only one true one while some suspect that none is wholly true. (237–238)

So when we look at the many nations of the earth we find a division into four religious groupings, consisting of the Jews, Christians, Muslims, and pagans. This at least was the common categorization, generally accepted for the duration of the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> All of these divisions in turn possess their own internal divisions, and the members of each subdivision are thoroughly convinced that theirs and theirs alone is the one true faith. Each of these varieties has its own scholars to argue for the validity of that tradition. Add to the mix the further school which holds that they are all wrong, that no religion is entirely true. Granting all these facts, the cautious enquirer finds himself in a frustrating conundrum: given this great diversity of beliefs, what are the chances that he himself

has been so lucky as to have been born into the true faith, and moreover how can he now possibly determine which faith, if any, is the true one?

It is interesting that Boyle picked this as the central question for his treatise. Certainly it was, and is, a legitimate question, but it was only one of a number relating to religious diversity being debated at the time. For instance, one major concern was soteriological: given that the large majority of the human race was known to be pagan (especially after the discovery of the New World), how should one think about the possibility of salvation for those ignorant of the tenets of Christianity? At the time this was a significant issue among English Protestant thinkers, both Calvinists and Arminians.

As one might expect, it was less of a concern for latitudinarians and deists. Charles Blount, writing a bit later than Boyle's present treatise, argued that no special revelation at all was needed for salvation, and that it would be unjust of God to make special knowledge a condition for a pleasant afterlife.<sup>4</sup> Though it should be noted that the whole emphasis on knowledge and its role in salvation is one which began in earnest in the early modern period, and no doubt complicated this debate; 'religion' came to be defined in terms of a set of doctrines rather than in terms of piety; revelation came to be seen as a matter of God's revealing certain propositions, rather than revealing Himself. Methodism was an eventual reaction to this trend, and the Cambridge Platonists a notable contemporary exception.<sup>5</sup>

Another concern was the difficulty this new diversity raised for the standard interpretations of sacred history. Just how did the Native Americans, with their many apparently polytheistic faiths, fit into the biblical record of post-diluvian history? For that matter, how did the Chinese? These two groups were subjects of particular interest. Regarding the Native Americans, some proposed that after the universal flood and resettling of the planet, a successful voyage was made from the Old World to the New; Dionysius Petavius and Simon Patrick proposed that a land bridge had once connected the two; Thomas Burnet argued that Adam's descendants settled the whole world before the flood, and that the Native Americans were among those God spared, aside from Noah; 'Bishop Francis Goodwin toyed with the notion that the natives of the New World were of extra-terrestrial origin, being the flawed rejects of a Utopian Lunar civilisation'.<sup>6</sup> (Though given that the speculation took place within the context of what is essentially an early science fiction novel, *The Man in the Moon, or a Discourse of a Voyage Thither by D. Gonsales*, the Bishop's seriousness is rather doubtful.) China was the subject of intense interest for a variety of reasons, prominent among them being the great antiquity of its culture. One resulting proposal was that Noah's Ark had in fact landed in China, with Chinese being the original language of mankind, preserved to this day after the confusion of Babel.<sup>7</sup>

Yet another had to do with theodicy: if God exists and is concerned for humanity, why has He allowed this multiplication of faiths, some of which at least

must be in significant error? These two issues are of course related, in that sacred history will no doubt play a role in most Christian theodicies relating to diversity, with the origin of erroneous religious views ultimately tracing back to the fall.

Yet Boyle opts not to address these questions. He is concerned with what is arguably a more foundational issue, and one which was also a matter of widespread discussion at the time, religious scepticism. At root the question is how one can rationally affirm the Christian faith in the midst of sceptical worry arising from diversity. Boyle's concern lies not in why God would allow diversity, or in how exactly salvation is played out in such a world, but rather in how anyone could rationally believe himself correct in choosing a particular religion – in Boyle's case Christianity – when faced with such a vast throng of competitors.

Still, there is the question of why Boyle opts not to address these other questions. Of course a writer is never obliged to cover every relevant problem within the confines of a single (brief) treatise, and any one of these questions merits a book-length treatment. But I think a further justification may be given for Boyle's reticence on some of these other issues. As to the question of why God allows diversity, I suspect one reason that Boyle does not here address this question of general theodicy is that his fundamental motive is to defend the Christian faith; among other things, Boyle is an apologist, and one of the most prominent of the seventeenth century. Yet this worry is one which arises for a theist of any stripe, not just for a Christian or someone positing a special revelation, and so it is one which Boyle may feel no pressing need to discuss here. As Manuel observes, theodicy was just as much of a concern for the deists:

The major problems confronting a Deist in the reconstruction of a world history of religion had already been faced by the orthodox. How [to] explain the bewildering variety of religious experience, which the voyage literature and translations from the Chinese, Indian, Persian and Vedic sacred writings had thrust into the forefront of European consciousness ... . Why had God allowed monstrous perversions of His pure Being to exist in the world?<sup>8</sup>

I am not of course suggesting that the problem is one which a Christian can wholly ignore; rather that it is a problem of broader application which, in the context of Boyle's present concerns, is one which he can be excused for passing over. He is setting out to defend the Christian faith specifically in the face of a sceptical worry, not theism in general, and so he can properly sidestep a challenge applying to theism in general.

As to the soteriological worry, Boyle himself seems not entirely clear on how much knowledge is required for salvation, and does not specifically discuss the fate of distant, non-evangelized pagans; but he is definitely inclined to take a liberal view of the matter, while at the same time holding that it is a Christian duty to grow in knowledge of the faith.<sup>9</sup> Since the problem is most acute for someone

holding to a highly exclusivist doctrine of salvation, which Boyle likely does not accept, it is understandable that he does not address it here.

To return to the argument Boyle does address, it is, in its basic outline, a familiar one. Of course it would be framed differently today; his four-fold division must certainly be dropped in favour of a much wider diversity. Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism, Jainism, Confucianism, and other religious systems can hardly be lumped together in one massive grab-bag entitled 'paganism'. The fact that Boyle does so simply reflects the lack of clarity concerning these religions in his own day, and of their distinction from what we would today refer to as pagan religions. While knowledge of religious diversity had increased leaps and bounds in Boyle's lifetime as compared to some preceding centuries, hence the pressing nature of this argument, major gaps in knowledge remained to be filled.

However, despite the need for some corrections in its precise formulation, the argument Boyle takes up for consideration is one well worth considering. For it can hardly be denied that the world is full of diverse religious traditions, and that within those traditions there may be found a plethora of contradictory doctrines. The Christian can grant that there is a great deal of truth in Buddhism, but cannot grant that reincarnation is true, at least not if he is to remain a Christian. Inter-religious dialogue can get one only so far, and the dream of an ultimate unification of all the world's faiths remains precisely that, *pace* the well-meaning Bahais. So the question remains: faced with this diversity, how can there be any hope of discovering the truth?

Boyle is acutely aware of the force of the argument, though he takes it to be a limited force nonetheless:

I myself have often considered this reasoning, and I frankly admit that it is quite capable of disquieting those who profess a religion simply because it is the religion of their parents, their ruler, their tutors or their native land, or for whatever other reason which, being unrelated to the essence of the matter, will serve contrary, erroneous beliefs equally well. And if only there were far fewer who allow themselves to be so easily misled.  
(238)

Thus, the argument carries weight, but only for those who have accepted their religion on grounds that have nothing to do with the objective evidence for its truth. On Boyle's view, this is the case for a great number.

He laments the fact that so many refrain from ever conducting a serious enquiry into the truth of their faith, and take up the matter, if at all, with such a pointed lack of rigor. Later on, he notes that this indifference may arise from a variety of causes: 'Whether this Stupidity or unconcern'dnes proceed *from* an undervaluation of what is neither to be obtain'd nor fear'd in this Life; *or* from an Inconsiderateness cherish'd by Busyness, Pleasures, and other Avocations; *or* whether the same Effect proceed rather from other causes, I shall not now discuss' (246).<sup>10</sup> And perhaps just as badly, when an enquiry is undertaken it is

often done not out of a sincere desire for the truth, whatever it may be, but out of a desire to reinforce old and cherished prejudices gleaned from early education. This is a folly to which even the most learned may succumb, and it takes a strong and independent mind to step back and really examine things objectively. Otherwise

... the first Errors of their Youth make the Notices acquir'd in their riper years to be useless, because look'd upon as needless. And if such prepossess'd Men attain to any great Wit and Learning, these are employ'd, not to reexamine & rectifye their first imbib'd Opinions, but to devise specious Arguments to defend them. (248–249)

Boyle's response to this depressing situation is to argue that despite all of these difficulties, it is both possible and a moral necessity to conduct a proper, objective enquiry into religious truth. And if one does so the result will be that Christianity emerges as the most plausible faith. Once the compelling evidences for Christianity are properly understood by a mind and heart willing to venture wherever the evidence leads, the diversity of the world's religions will no longer seem much of a problem. Certainly it will no longer constitute a reason to refrain from accepting this one faith. Boyle writes confidently that,

... whoever has seriously examined the four great religions under which all the others can be classified – whoever, I say, examines them with the attention the subject demands, will be fully aware that the Christian religion is the one to be embraced, and that any one of the Christian religions is to be preferred to all the rest. Further, I see no reason why the afore-mentioned objection, notwithstanding its appearance of validity, should turn such a man away from the Christian religion, or persuade him that it is unwise to give it such firm assent as it in fact demands. (238)

This may seem a rather bold claim, given what he has already said about how so many are indifferent towards or hopelessly biased in religious enquiries. Clearly Boyle does not place himself among those groups. He honestly believes that he has looked objectively at the evidence, and that it points in a certain direction. And whatever one might think of the conclusions Boyle comes to, there is no need to doubt his intellectual integrity on these points. He was known in his lifetime to have a high personal regard for truth, and we can grant for the sake of argument that he is exempt from the criticisms he makes of others.

Boyle begins his positive reply to the argument above by first seeking to rob it of some of its force more directly. He points out that though the world is mostly populated by non-Christians, the claim that this fact tells against the faith is weakened by the observation that most of those non-Christians have never heard of it. So although they have religions of their own, and outnumber the Christians, these facts cannot be interpreted as some sort of argument from authority against the Christian religion, for it is quite possible that were these distant masses to

hear and understand the gospel, they would recognize its truth. After having noted the massive population of China, Boyle writes:

But these Chinese, like all other nations and tribes that have not had the Gospel laid before them, are rightly said rather to lack the Christian religion than to have rejected it. So it is improper for us to doubt its truth simply because they do not approve of it, just as an Eastern pearl remains a true pearl, and a true gem, even though many counterfeit necklaces are sold every day, and though the gem of which we speak has not been assayed by jewellers or goldsmiths, it never having been part of the merchandise. (239–240)

The fact that the most populated nation on earth barely contains any Christians is not really a problem, for they have hardly been exposed to it.

But what of other regions of the world which have been exposed to Christianity and have remained largely pagan? To this Boyle replies that ‘besides those to whom the Gospel has never been presented, there are innumerable others among whom it has not been presented in the manner in which it ought to be, still less in the most fitting manner’ (240). It is quite possible for the faith to be badly presented, and consequently achieve few conversions. This substandard presentation can occur in a number of ways: for one, the Christians making contact may not be educated or even particularly concerned with spreading the gospel. Boyle notes that with the exception of Jesuit missionaries and a rather limited number of others, most of those Christians who have ventured to far-off places have been sailors and merchants worried about profit rather than proselytizing. And when genuine religious dialogue does take place between the latter and the natives of the new countries, the lack of theological and philosophical training of these Christians can result in a poor presentation and defence of the faith.

Another problem Boyle brings up here has to do with the divisions within Christendom. Specifically, some denominations have allowed a certain amount of doctrinal error to creep in, and the unreasonable teachings resulting therefrom can impede the spreading of the faith. Thus while praising the Jesuits for their devotion and zeal in evangelization, he complains that

... when they preach the Gospel they also teach the cult of images, which causes the greatest offence and no small scandal among both Mohammedans and Jews, this practice being a serious obstacle to their conversion. As for the doctrine of transubstantiation and the worship of the host, the extent to which these may turn away from Christianity those unbelievers who use their reason is plain to all. (241)

More generally, Boyle is a critic of turning mere speculations in philosophical theology into dogmas, the assent to which is mandatory.<sup>11</sup> Rightly or wrongly, he considers transubstantiation and the theology of icons to be examples of this.

One should in fairness add that, given the historical context of continued Catholic–Protestant ill-feeling, Boyle’s praise of the Jesuits is more remarkable than his criticism of certain elements of their theology. In fact Boyle numbered Jesuits among his scientific correspondents, and this is not the only passage in

which he praises their missionary work.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the present treatise as a whole is an exception to a widespread trend in early modern English writing on world religions, in that it is devoid of attempts to utilize data about other faiths in order to launch a critique against Catholicism. It was a common practice among English Protestants to draw attention to aspects of pagan ritual which seemed to resemble elements of Catholic practice (such as the use of visual imagery), thereby implying that Catholics were little better than pagans. Harrison goes so far as to say that ‘while much comparison of “religions” took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most of it was motivated not by any deep interest in the religious faith of other peoples, but by the desire to score points from theological adversaries’.<sup>13</sup> Of course, Boyle is hardly a disinterested student of world religions; but at least he is not writing the present treatise with a mind to narrow denominational squabbles.

Added to the difficulty arising from erroneous doctrines inessential to the faith is the problem of the moral life of some of its adherents. It is natural to judge a tree by its fruit, and consequently it is hardly to be expected that a religion will be given a warm reception among those who have been abused by its adherents. So, for Boyle,

... it is not at all surprising that there are still so many heathens in the Spanish Indies, since the very men who preached the Gospel to them showed their contempt for it by leading lives corrupted by every form of wickedness, notorious for murder, excess, savagery, cruelty, avarice and perfidy. (242)

On his view all three preceding points serve to weaken the force of the argument. It is not the fault of the faith itself that it is not more widely accepted, with the diversity of religions correspondingly reduced. Rather it is the fault, first, of people’s ignorance of it; second, of the fact that so often when new nations are exposed to the gospel they are exposed to a doctrinally suspect version of it; and that its exponents are often far from exemplars of Christian virtue.

Yet the argument, though weakened, is not defeated. In order to show that one can actually determine which among the world’s religions is the true faith, it must be shown that some one of those faiths possesses better evidence for its veracity than all the rest, such that it can be accepted with a rational confidence. He thinks Christianity warrants such acceptance, and bases his contention mainly on two points, ‘the holiness of the doctrine itself, and the miracles which its first proponents accomplished in confirmation of it’ (242).

Boyle takes the first point to be the best argument for the faith,<sup>14</sup> and an important back-up to the argument from miracles. The ethical teachings confirm the miracles in the sense that miracles only function as evidence of the truth of a religion if the tenets of that faith accord with what reason tells us. By reason alone we can apprehend moral truths, and also a good deal of truth about God (that He exists, is one, holy, morally perfect, etc.). If a would-be prophet comes along



proclaiming a new religion which contradicts what reason reveals, then that prophet can be disregarded, miracles or no miracles. So however impressive the evidence for the miracles of early Christianity may have been, if the Christian message did not accord with what we know of ethics and natural theology the Christian message could rightly be discarded.<sup>15</sup> Yet the moral teachings of Jesus are of such evident truth and sublimity that any person with an active conscience can recognize them and so be predisposed to listen to the rest of the Christian message. Among those of a debased character, however, it can act as a stumbling block, since it demands repentance and the abandonment of sinful ways of life.

When it comes to the evidence of miracles, Boyle considers it secure enough to persuade any reasonable and open-minded person of good character. Yet because one must deal with historical documents, and therefore testimony, one inevitably deals in probabilities. Mathematical certainty is not possible in the realm of history, for in that realm one does not begin from self-evident axioms and deductions therefrom. Instead one deals with fallible human testimony. But this does not really tell against the reasonableness of accepting the Christian claims here, provided the evidence is actually good, for when it comes to enquiries of this kind,

... many, far more indeed, of the truths approved of and accepted by us, especially those which rest on historical traditions or similar things that lead to practical knowledge, do not so thrust themselves before the mind's eye (so to speak) that we do not also need to more closely examine the arguments that support them and thoroughly reject all the prejudices that might prevent us from discerning their force and superiority. (243)

That is, we cannot refuse to examine the Christian evidences simply because they come to us in historical documents. If we refused on those grounds alone, we would have to give up a huge swathe of human knowledge which rests on precisely that type of ground. Instead what we have to do is apply the same standards of enquiry we normally use in the historical sphere and see how the Christian claims fare.

However, since historical arguments of this sort grant at best moral certainty, such that they can be accepted as true beyond a reasonable doubt but not known with the certainty pertaining to mathematical truths, it is always possible for someone to deny them. Of course, this does not constitute an objection against Christianity, because it would be inappropriate to apply a mathematical standard of demonstration to an historical enquiry.<sup>16</sup> Yet we are left with the result that it is possible to doubt the truths of Christianity, even if it is not reasonable to do so, whereas it is not even possible to doubt the truths of mathematics. And this is important, because if the truths of revelation were known with the same certainty as the truths of mathematics, there would be no room for the exercise of faith, and it would be unjust for God to reward its possession. Yet Christianity tells us that

He does, and so it would be very odd if Christians were to proclaim anything more than moral certainty practically possible when it comes to matters of revelation.

Nor perhaps will it seem surprising that I speak in such terms if, like me, you bear in mind that faith is prescribed by our religion, and is rewarded with great gifts, and that faithlessness if threatened with and punished by the heaviest suffering. In contrast, however, this would not be done by a God both just and wise if we were unable to resist or withstand the arguments adduced in favour of Christianity, or to embrace Christianity of our own accord when we yield to the divine grace which is scarcely ever absent from lovers of the Gospel. For it seems entirely divorced from reason to reward men for what they of necessity had to do, and excessively harsh to punish them for what they could not help doing. (242–245)

Instead, we find ourselves in the much more acceptable position where the evidence for Christianity outweighs that of other religions to the extent that although no-one acts from necessity in accepting or rejecting it, those who accept it are acting reasonably and are praiseworthy, and those who reject it are blameworthy.

One might at this point ask whether it is really likely that if the evidence for Christianity were as good as Boyle thinks it, enough to establish it for a fair-minded enquirer, it would be deniable in the way it currently is. The question of the quality of the Christian evidences is, of course, open to debate, but the truth of the point Boyle is making here seems to me fairly obvious. People have a tremendous knack for denying things. Terence Penelhum puts this quite well, though in the course of pursuing a rather different point than Boyle is after:

It is the easiest thing in the world for something to be proved to me that I still will not accept. All I need to do is to be determined about going back to the premises of the argument and questioning them, or denying the cogency of the steps that lead from the evidence to the conclusion. I can deceive myself, readily, about the facts the proof is based on, or the logic of the reasoning that concludes with it. All I need is a little training in philosophy. The world is full of people who deny things they know perfectly well.<sup>17</sup>

It is obvious that a great deal of the force of Boyle's reply to the argument rests on this claim that the evidence for the Christian revelation is sufficiently good to warrant acceptance. And whatever one thinks of the actual cogency of the Christian evidences, in principle it is hard to deny the relevance of this point. If there really were a single religion possessed of very good evidence for the truth of its main tenets, then the problem of diversity would be greatly mitigated.

Concerning this diversity, Boyle proceeds to argue that it is not really so great as it first appears, for the religions of the world may be divided into the four aforementioned groups, and the subdivisions are not as important as one might think. If the enquirer

... be carefull to examine thorowly the grounds of those four Religions, he need not be solicitous about every particular Sect of each of Them; since these, though they may differ in very many things among themselves, yet agreeing in Fundamentalls, if those be found ruinous, the severall superstructures must of Necessity fall with them. (249)

At least in the initial enquiry then, one need not consider the Presbyterian church as a separate and distinct entity from the Roman Catholic Church, or Sunni Islam as distinct from the Ismailis. One need only look at Christianity and Islam. Given his reservations about certain aspects of Catholicism, it is clear that Boyle considers at least some denominational differences to be of importance; just not sufficiently important to make a relevant difference in the initial evaluation of the main competing religions.

Boyle then proceeds to consider the four, beginning with paganism, which he takes to be the most commonly held religion. Boyle grants that there are a multitude of varieties of paganism, many with contradictory beliefs and widely divergent practices. The common link, as he sees it, is 'either simple Polytheism, or the Worship of many Godds, or else Polytheism with the addition of idolatry' (250). Boyle holds that he need not bother refuting these religions, 'for to believe there are, or can be, many real Deitys is repugnant to the very Notion of a God, that Notion being truly stated & understood' (250). The inherent problems of paganism become clear from the fact that pagan beliefs collapse without the support of civil government. Hence, Christianity's peaceful conquest of the Roman empire, once it was legalized. Give people free reign, and they will abandon paganism in favour of even so problematic a faith as Islam: 'Idolatry once clearly discover'd, being so repugnant to the Dignity & Reason of Mankind, that these People chuse rather to embrace even Mahomets Law, than continue in the Impiety of all their Forefathers' (251).

It is interesting that Boyle here takes the pagan religions as unambiguously polytheistic. This is in contrast to an important contemporary theorist on religious diversity, the early deist, Lord Herbert of Cherbury.<sup>18</sup> His works include the widely-read *De Religione Gentilium*, published in 1668, in which it is argued that belief in a supreme God is one of five basic religious tenets that people naturally come to believe in, absent interference and corruption. To the riposte that this idea is hard to sustain, given the sheer commonality of polytheism, he possesses a two-fold reply. Firstly, belief in a single supreme God is compatible with belief in a number of other, lesser gods; so what we often take for polytheism among the pagans might in fact be a more sophisticated henotheism. And secondly, it may be that many or all of the other gods are simply symbols for aspects of nature which manifest the divine presence. Thus, a great deal of pagan worship may be interpreted as worship of one God in the form of His many attributes. Peter Byrne summarizes Herbert's position:

The pagan peoples had the notion of a supreme God written in their hearts and possessed an inbuilt desire to discover and worship him. This longing was awakened by the contemplation of nature, through whose fabric God is manifested. Thus they come to worship God in and through the works of nature. But their veneration of aspects of the natural world is compatible with their acknowledgement and service of the one supreme God.<sup>19</sup>

It is unclear whether Boyle ever read Herbert's works; though he never makes an explicit reference to Herbert in either his published or unpublished writings, this hardly rules out his at least being familiar with Herbert's ideas. At any rate, the separation between Herbert and Boyle is not as great as it might first appear, for though Boyle does not share Herbert's stance on the pagan's acknowledgement of a single high God, he does hold that monotheism is, in a sense, more 'natural' than polytheism. As noted above, Boyle maintains that pagans will readily give up their polytheism if confronted with monotheism, since the former runs so contrary to human dignity and reason. On his view,

Heathenism is in it self so pittifull a Religion, that it does need nothing to make it be laid aside by whole Nations, but to have the Intrinsicke weakness and impiety of it nakedly discover'd, and ceas'd to be upheld by the secular force, and the Protection of the Civill Magistrate. (250)

Boyle and Herbert thus agree that acknowledgement of a supreme deity is by nature the theology of choice for ordinary people. Where they differ is in their assessment of paganism as it actually existed, with Boyle taking the apparent polytheism of pagans at face value and Herbert striving to interpret it in a more favourable (from their perspective) light. Both agree that actual polytheism, unaccompanied by a belief (at least implicit) in a single high God, is a corruption of the normal religious instinct of humanity.

It is interesting to speculate on what Boyle would have thought of Hinduism had he been better informed concerning the nuances of the various schools of Hindu theology. For example, a number of schools accept the existence of many gods, but it is commonly maintained that these gods are all manifestations of one ultimate deity (Herbert would have found in Indian religion at least a vindication of his views). Whether or not this perspective would stand up to Boyle's natural theology is an open question, but it is clear that this version of polytheism is not simply absurd, not subject to the quick dismissal Boyle here provides of polytheism more generally. And once again Boyle's point that there is not much diversity among 'pagan' religions is weakened. Seeing as how he would have classed Jainism, Buddhism, Taoism, and other very distinct traditions as 'pagan', the point is undermined still further.

Boyle next turns to Islam. According to him, the Koran is a document filled with falsehood and absurdity, which is why Mohammad had to resort to armed force in order to spread it. Moreover, it actually bears witness against itself and in favour of Christianity, 'since it bears Testimony to the Old Testament and the New; and acknowledges Christ to be not only a great Prophet, but the Son of a Virgin, tho Christs Religion did altogether condemn the Mahometan' (251).<sup>20</sup> It is quite clear that Boyle's single-paragraph dismissal of Islam is inadequate. Though he had read the Koran, and was impressed neither with its content nor its

literary style,<sup>21</sup> nothing Boyle provides here gives a particularly strong reason for thinking Islam to be false. No example of the Koran's 'absurdities' is provided; perhaps this is understandable, given Boyle's Western audience, who would not have considered Islam a realistic possibility anyway. But surely given the aim of the treatise something more ought to be said.

Boyle is rather more respectful towards Judaism. He thinks the evidence for the truthfulness of the Old Testament, and of the important Jewish dogmas, is compelling. But he also thinks that whatever grounds one has for accepting Judaism, one will have equally strong grounds for accepting Christianity, as the evidence is of the same type, but even stronger. First listing as some of the evidences for Judaism such things as a high moral doctrine and the miracles performed by the prophets, Boyle writes:

For it has all the abovemention'd Excellencies, and divers others besides; and even in those which are common to them both, the Christian has, for the most part, peculiar advantages; the Precepts being better in themselves, in many Points, and in divers things more perfect and more perfective of Humane Nature; the Promises being more illustrious, or more express, or both, the Miracles being much more Numerous; insomuch that our Christ, (and perhaps the like may be said of his Disciples) did singly in a very few years performe more Miracles, then all that are ascribd to Moses, and perhaps more than the Jews attribute to all the Prophets to boot. And, as for the Conveyance of the things deliver'd in the new Testament; those things were deliver'd so recently after they happen'd, and were recorded; that men might easily examine whether they were true, or no. (253–254)

So Boyle's view is that Judaism is not so much false as incomplete, and the evidences for it can act as evidences for Christianity. If the rational and open-minded enquirer can be led to accept Judaism, how much more should he be willing to embrace Christianity when confronted with its even more impressive claims.

Boyle goes on to note that not only are there fewer genuinely distinct religions than people realize, but that fewer people voluntarily adhere to their own religion than is commonly thought. And so the fact that most of the world is not Christian is no argument against that faith. In order for someone to really choose his faith, he must carefully examine the evidence for it and for its competitors. This the mass of humanity has not done, so the fact that most people are not Christians really does not speak against the truth of Christianity. The fact that most of the world is pagan does not speak in favour of paganism, for most pagans have not gone through this type of rigorous enquiry. So,

... it is wrong to refer to how many have made a judgement in some matter requiring close examination if in fact they have not seriously examined it, just as it is quite irrelevant that many have accepted counterfeit money as good if none of them has chosen to test it or, through lack of experience, was able to ... we may readily note that there are few who choose a given religion, even though there are many who follow it. (256)

Boyle then goes on to look at the worry that if there are so many divergent views on something, maybe that is an indication that there is no actual truth to be had in the relevant sphere of enquiry. If there is so much disagreement over religion, maybe no religion is true. But Boyle correctly notes that this is not a necessary consequence of diversity, since there can likewise be a great diversity of views in the scientific realm, where it is clear that there is some base level truth to be had, independent of conflicting opinions.<sup>22</sup> 'For contradictory assertions regarding the same individual points, or ones that are of equal weight to them, are sometimes as hotly defended as religions that thoroughly disagree in essence' (258). If disagreements in science do not lead us to doubt that there is an underlying, objective basis for scientific truth-claims, disagreement in religion should not lead us to such doubts.

Finally, Boyle argues that trying to play the numbers game is inevitably a losing prospect. If one refrains from being a Christian because so much of the world disagrees with that faith (whether or not the disagreement is knowledgeable), then what is the alternative? If one instead becomes a Muslim, then the Jews, Christians, and pagans will all be against him, and the same problem arises. In fact the same problem arises whichever choice is made; whichever religion is chosen, it will be the case that most of the world will be against that choice. This applies even for paganism. For though most of the world is pagan, and the common belief in polytheism and idolatry allow for this to be treated, in a way, as a single religion, the actual diversity of pagan doctrine and practice should not be lost sight of. For,

... pagans not only differ among themselves, as do those who worship one God, regarding the rule of the faith and the manner of worship, but also regarding the very nature of the object of their worship. For some people worship corporeal objects, some intelligent and invisible spirits, such as the souls of the dead, and others. Some, indeed, worship only good spirits, others bad ones too. (261–262)

So although the pagan who worships nature gods and the pagan who worships ancestor gods can both be classed as 'pagan', the ancestor worshipper cannot appeal to majority support when claiming that his religion is best, for although most people are pagans, it is not the case that most pagans are ancestor worshipers. The same point will apply to any variety of paganism, and so Boyle's contention that the numbers game works for no-one holds. No religion has a notable advantage here.

Note that Boyle is quite consciously walking a fine line. He realizes that pagan religions must be similar enough that his earlier argument, according to which they are all inferior to Christianity by virtue of being pagan (i.e. idolatrous and polytheistic), will work. Yet they must be diverse enough so that the present argument goes through. Given the information he had at the time on 'pagan' religions, I suspect he succeeds in doing so. Given what we know today of the

actual doctrinal systems of the world's religions, the first argument falters, while the second correspondingly gains in strength.

Boyle ends the treatise with a final argument he takes to be of considerable import, and so it is worth quoting at some length:

He who rejects the Christian [religion],<sup>23</sup> for instance, together with all the others, on the grounds that if he embraces any one of them he will have to disagree with, and be condemned by, many more sects than those that share his views, falls into Scylla in the hope of avoiding Charybdis. In other words, he falls prey to the very misfortune he had wished to avoid. For in this way he manages to disagree not only with all the particular religions not approved of by Christianity, but also with the Christian religion itself. So he stands in opposition to more men, and to many more sects, than he would have done if he had embraced any one particular religion. For then he has all religions completely hostile towards him and, accordingly, is condemned by all religions together for preferring no religion at all ... . For when all these disparate religions, while scarcely on anything else, are definitely agreed on this, that there is *some* true religion (for everyone considers the sect he embraces to be the true one), so that with one voice they condemn the man who adheres to no religion, then such a concert of otherwise so disparate sects seems to me the very voice of nature, or, if you prefer, an innate precept of mankind. (263–264)

What Boyle is presenting here is a kind of argument from common consent. This sometimes comes up with respect to theism, or with respect to the belief in some sort of transcendent reality: the vast majority of people throughout history have believed in a transcendent reality, therefore it is likely to be true, or at least worthy of serious investigation. Here the argument has the same form but a different premise: the vast majority of people throughout history have believed that there is some true religion, therefore it is likely that there really is a true religion, or at least that the issue bears investigating; Boyle seems to adopt the former, stronger form of the conclusion. In this context he certainly intends 'an innate precept of mankind' to be thought of as truth-tracking, and he would no doubt be inclined to add this precept to Herbert of Cherbury's list of five common notions.

Boyle's reflections still have some value. It seems to me that the stance he adopts in addressing the sceptical worry arising from diversity is fundamentally correct: faced with abundant diversity, all we can do is try our best to assess fairly the philosophical and historical claims of the world's major religions and see if any of them hold up to scrutiny. The extent to which one can actually succeed at this may depend to a large extent on whether Boyle is correct in thinking that we already know a good deal by reason alone. Certainly the process of religious enquiry would be greatly aided if one already had justified beliefs about God and morality gained through reason, independently of revelation. If one can prove by natural theology that God exists and is one, just, omnipotent, etc., then a whole swathe of religions can automatically be dismissed. Likewise, if one can show that miracles are at least possible, the worth of looking seriously into accounts of the miraculous becomes much more evident.<sup>24</sup>

I do not think, however, that enquiry into claims of revelation needs be kept on hold until absolute assurance be gained on the points of natural theology. While an important aid in the investigation, it should be recognized that arguments from natural theology will often play a reciprocal role with the evidential claims of particular faiths. Plausible arguments for the existence of God may lead one to take the claims of monotheistic religions more seriously, but likewise if one finds that the evidence for miracles in a certain faith is compelling, one will be more inclined to look with favour on the arguments of natural theology. Similar points could be made with reference to ethics. If one thinks Jesus' moral teachings are sublime, one will be more likely to look with an open mind on the miracle claims than if one viewed them as useless or wicked. And if one thinks the miracle claims are well-supported, one may be more inclined to take the moral teachings seriously, even to the extent of changing opinions on the wisdom of turning the other cheek, or some other precept that many find difficult to accept.

All that having been said, if one desires a complete solution to the various problems surrounding diversity from a Christian perspective, it is not to be found here. As noted earlier, there are several important areas of difficulty that Boyle opts not to address, particularly with respect to soteriology and the problems of theodicy and interpretation of sacred history. I have tried to indicate why it might be that Boyle feels no need to bring them up in this particular treatise, though we must keep in mind as well that he never saw fit to publish the piece; perhaps such incompleteness worried him. At any rate, the fact that the treatise does not solve all relevant problems surely ought not to obscure the philosophical value it does possess, in addition to its historical interest both in relation to the early modern debate on diversity, and as a piece of Boyle's scholarship which has heretofore been mostly unknown.<sup>25</sup>

## Notes

1. Robert Boyle 'De diversitate religionum (on the diversity of religions)', in Michael Hunter and Edward B. Davis (eds) *The Works of Robert Boyle*, 14 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000), XIV, 237–265. All in-text references are to this work.
2. Hunter and Davis *Works*, XIV, xxviii–xxix.
3. See Peter Harrison '*Religion*' and *the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 39.
4. For a summary, see Peter Byrne *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 53–55.
5. Harrison '*Religion*' and *the Religions*, 24–25, 59. Indeed, the Cambridge Platonists had an interesting soteriological perspective, one which Vatican II would later echo. For most of them, non-Christians could be saved even without an explicit knowledge of Christ, though that salvation would still be mediated by Christ.
6. *Ibid.*, 127.
7. For further discussion see *ibid.*, 137–155.
8. Frank E. Manuel *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (New York NY Atheneum, 1967), 58–59.



9. See Robert Boyle 'The excellency of theology compar'd with natural philosophy', Hunter and Davis *Works*, VIII, 42–43.
10. Boyle had read Pascal, and one is bound to be reminded here of the latter's comments on indifference. Yet the thrust of the two is somewhat different: Boyle is concerned about indifference with regard to testing the truth of one's own religious faith, whereas Pascal is worried about indifference to religious issues in general. I doubt Pascal would see any fault in a devoutly religious Christian who refrains from putting his faith to rigorous rational scrutiny, which is what Boyle is calling for. What Pascal would say about the devout Muslim or Hindu is less clear.
11. 'And Indeed, when on the one side I consider the charitable design of the Gospel, and the candid simplicity that shines in what it proposes, or commands; and on the other side, what strange and wilde Speculations and Inferences have been father'd upon it, not only in the Metaphysical Writings of some Schoolmen, but in the Articles of Faith of some Churches; I cannot but think, that if all these Doctrines are parts of the Christian Religion, the Apostles, if they were now alive, would at best be but *Catechumini*'; Robert Boyle, 'Some considerations about the reconcileableness of reason and religion', Hunter and Davis *Works*, VIII, 247.
12. See Robert Boyle 'The History of Fluidity and Firmnesse', Hunter and Davis *Works*, II, 201.
13. Harrison, '*Religion*' and *the Religions*, 146.
14. At least, he does here. Elsewhere he inclines to the view that miracles are the best argument for the truth of Christianity: 'the several Patefactions which God has been pleas'd to make of himself, to Man especially, those made by seasonably accomplish'd Prophesies, and by Miracles, do not onely demonstrate the Being, but the Providence, and divers of the Attributes of God. And indeed, methinks, the Divines we reason with may well allow these Patefactions to be capable of evincing the existence of a God, since they are sufficient, and, for ought I know, the best Arguments we have to convince a rational Man of the truth of the Christian Religion'; Robert Boyle 'Some considerations touching the usefulness of experimental natural philosophy', Hunter and Davis *Works*, III, 272. Since this work was written about twenty years prior to 'On the diversity of religions', it seems as if Boyle changed his view on the matter in the intervening years. Of course, the proviso 'for ought I know' may indicate hesitation, so it could be that no real alteration of his opinion is indicated.
15. Compare Locke's claim that miracles supporting an unreasonable or immoral doctrine cannot be accepted as divine, 'because God having discovered to men the unity and majesty of his eternal Godhead, and the truths of natural religion and morality by the light of reason, he cannot be supposed to back the contrary by revelation'; John Locke 'A discourse of miracles', in *The Works of John Locke, in Nine Volumes*, VIII, 5th edn (London: Longman, 1794), 261–262.
16. Boyle makes the same point elsewhere; see 'Some considerations about the reconcileableness of reason and religion', 282. It should be kept in mind, however, that Boyle viewed the existence of God as permitting a stricter proof than many of the articles specific to the Christian faith. See *ibid.*, 248. On the notion of certainty in Boyle, see Hendrik Gerrit Van Leeuwen *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought 1630–1690* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963). For a more general discussion of Boyle's epistemology, see J. J. MacIntosh 'Robert Boyle's epistemology: the interaction between scientific and religious knowledge', *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, 6 (1992), 91–121.
17. Terence Penelhum 'Do religious beliefs need grounds?', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*, 40 (1986), 227–237.
18. I refer to him as a deist while recognizing that the application of the term to Herbert is in need of some provisos. See Harrison '*Religion*' and *the Religions*, 61–63; see also Byrne *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion*, 22.
19. *Ibid.*, 28. It should be observed that later theorists found it difficult to uphold Herbert's idea. Harrison writes: 'Later deists retreated from this view, granting that the majority seldom rose above superstition in their efforts to be religious, while insisting that in all ages there had been an exclusive group of philosophical bent who had believed no more and no less than the principles of natural theology ... . Following [Charles] Blount's lead, the deists of the eighteenth century opted for exclusive but explicit belief in natural religion rather than the universal and implicit belief which Herbert proposed'; Harrison '*Religion*' and *the Religions*, 86.
20. The last line likely refers to the first chapter of Galatians, where anyone who accepts a different revelation is anathematized, even should that revelation come from an angel. That, of course, would rule out Mohammad's alleged interaction with Gabriel. See Galatians 1.6–8.

21. Boyle gives a rather harsh assessment in 'Some considerations touching the style of the Holy Scriptures', Hunter and Davis *Works*, II, 452–454.
22. Boyle is, of course, mercifully writing before the advent of anti-realism in science.
23. The bracketed word is not present in the Latin version, but is supplied in the English translation.
24. For a recent piece advocating a perspective rather like Boyle's, see Harold Netland 'Natural theology and religious diversity', *Faith and Philosophy*, 21 (2004), 503–519.
25. I would like to express my sincere thanks to J. J. MacIntosh, the Editor, and an anonymous referee for this journal for their many helpful suggestions.