

## Pluralism and ineffability

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In a tribute to the work of Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff characterizes a form of the analytic tradition in philosophy of religion, which neither he nor Plantinga endorses, as a brand of *Kant-rationality*. What such rationality aims to achieve is, above all, a *universality* of rational agreement, or rather ‘a foundation that is acceptable to all rational reflective human-beings’, something that could be acknowledged by ‘all cognitively competent adult human beings’ who had access to the same relevant information or facts.<sup>1</sup>

Is this a genuine possibility when we consider many of the classic problems in the philosophy of religion? For example, the search for a cognitive universality, if it is the sole objective, might be considered to be tone deaf when it comes to the problem of evil and suffering, where tone seems to be an important ingredient for constructing a cogent response. More pertinent for the purposes of this article, is the *Kant-rationality* likely to be a productive approach when confronted with the complexity of new data that characterizes global diversity? The philosophy of religion has been framed largely by a Judaeo-Christian discourse and by the classic problems and challenges that are relevant to theistic beliefs in particular. Even the question of religious pluralism, often called the ‘problem of religious diversity’, is configured as a challenge arising from conflicting truth-claims which reflects largely the anxieties of the Semitic traditions, especially Christianity and Islam. Searching for a new approach to the philosophy of religion that accurately accounts for the global dimension is becoming an important concern. For some it is a matter of finding a criterion that speaks to all religious forms, perhaps ethics or some form of ultimism; for others it may be a case of including multiple voices to address globally experienced challenges such as suffering and evil. Still others will contest Cartesian rationality and seek to bring practice or embodiment into the method of the philosophy of religion, perhaps following a quasi-Wittgensteinian understanding which sees belief and practice as closely entwined. Indeed, it is this latter emphasis that perhaps brings the traditions of phenomenology into the purview of the analytic philosophy of religion, often uneasy bedfellows. We shall return to this in the second part of this article.

For those who seek to encompass the sheer diversity of traditions within the scope of an overall interpretation of religion, there is the appeal to ineffability or the *transcategorical*. In a recent work that cites (critically) John Hick's use of the transcategorical in his philosophy of religions, Guy Bennett-Hunter seeks to rehabilitate the concept of ineffability in philosophy and put it to work. He defines ineffability as that which 'is *in principle* resistant to conceptual grasp and literal linguistic articulation'.<sup>2</sup> He argues that the concept has been neglected in contemporary philosophy and seeks to recommend its usage by both atheist and theist. It is clear that, following the work of David Cooper, he does not think that ineffability is the sole possession of religion, and this is what makes ineffability so interesting as a concept which opens up new possibilities for the future of the philosophy of religion and the categories that operate in its field. In this article, I will apply this concept critically to religious pluralism in particular. Of particular significance for this purpose will be some recent ideas deriving from the French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion.

This article is divided into two parts. The first will present a critical engagement with the work of two pluralist philosophers of religion: John Hick and Perry Schmidt-Leukel. Concentrating mostly on the former's pluralistic hypothesis, we will enquire into the nature of ineffability (the transcategorical, or 'the Real') in his system. Our chief criticisms will focus on the *formality* of its function as the noumenal part of a noumenal-phenomenal structure and how this disappoints religious believers, how it renders inconsequential the conversation between religions about the ultimate, and how it anaesthetizes interreligious meetings. Following from this, our question will concern what it is that might generate a more dynamic pluralistic model. Is the ineffable best described as a universal postulate of 'Kant-rationality' that transcends particularities, or can the ineffable be conceived to operate *locally* in the mystical experiences of specific interreligious contexts or events? In order to explore this idea, in the second part we will consider Jean-Luc Marion's idea of the 'saturated phenomenon' which seems to describe the ineffable as an excess of experience in contrast to Hick's formal regulating concept. Marion's phenomenological description of the givenness of religious experience and the 'saturated' meanings of events may suggest a more authentic starting point for interreligious thinking – and a possible terrain for philosophy of religion as it forges new theories of religious pluralism.

## I

Even if we accept Hick's basic formulation, which is proposed in order to account for religious diversity whilst retaining a commitment to a critical realist conception of the object of religious faith, my argument will be that his usage of ineffability for the purposes of religious pluralism is actually irrelevant when it comes to the *production* of pluralistic relationships. That is, it operates only as a formal second-order philosophical postulate that cannot be experienced. This latter aspect is

crucial. So, whereas the ineffable, as it operates in the religions themselves, may be unveiled through revelation in one form or another, or be experienceable through mystical or ascetic practices, the impossibility of direct experience of the ineffable is a necessary assumption of the pluralistic hypothesis. However, if we are to start from the ground up, as Hick's empiricist approach demands, then should the emphasis not be placed, instead, on the experiences or the 'events' of engagement between religions and what these experiences generate? What is it that builds a pluralistic model – is the ineffable a universal postulate of the Kant-rationality that transcends particularities, or can the ineffable operate as a *local* concept that denotes the mystical experiences found in specific interreligious contexts or events? Hick draws soteriological inferences from the ground-level ethical or salvific experiences of different religions which leads him to construct a soterio-centric model: transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. However, I want to argue that his encompassing ontological postulate 'the Real' does not sum up, or emerge from, the ineffable moments of engagements that might occur at the ground level. Defenders of Hick will reply that this is a misplaced criticism because Hick's Real is indeed representative of the *concept* of ineffability in all religious traditions. Nevertheless, conceding this basic point, our enquiry seeks to find something in parallel that may complexify the picture: *can the ground-up interreligious engagements between traditions also generate what is ineffable about their meeting – a ground-up Real?*

The issue hinges on the *work* of ineffability.<sup>3</sup> The responses that might be offered to this reflect the classic tension between the idea of ineffability as something *beyond comprehension* and the possibility of it being spoken about or experienced in some way as a source or ground of meaning.<sup>4</sup> Thus, for some, ineffability can operate only as a formal concept that is experientially beyond reach.<sup>5</sup> For others, it is something that evokes a mysticism that challenges us to do the philosophy of religion in a new style,<sup>6</sup> one that is not fixated on rational belief as the sole aspect for consideration but which reflects critically on a range of cognitive, mystical, experiential, and personal data.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, ineffability is not a concept used only in connection with a divine transcendent object, but – certainly for phenomenologists from the second half of the twentieth century onwards – might refer to a mysterious sense of depth or 'excess' of meaning that surrounds or underpins life. Although it is not to be identified with phenomenology as a movement, the philosopher David E. Cooper seeks to adopt a 'delicate metaphysical position'.<sup>8</sup> By this he means to walk a tightrope that is poised between metaphysics and pure immanence. That is, a sense of 'beyond the human' that is not dependent on identifying it solely with the upper level of a 'two-levels' doctrine of reality. He writes: 'Absolutists . . . are right to insist that reality is independent of the human contribution, but wrong to suppose that this reality can be articulated. Humanists, correspondingly, are right to maintain that any discursable world is a human one, but wrong to equate reality with this world.'<sup>9</sup> Cooper opens up a perspective where he seeks, without endorsing a *transcendent* ultimate,

still to advance a sense of meaning that is ‘beyond the human’. That is, following Heidegger, he maintains that ‘how the world “discloses” itself to us . . . cannot be “our handiwork” . . .’<sup>10</sup> and that the sense of answerability, or the idea of a measure for human life, owes itself to *mystery*.<sup>11</sup> Thus, even if Cooper rejects the two-level view of reality, he nonetheless thinks that human life needs ineffability; it needs the ‘presence of what is mysterious’.<sup>12</sup>

Can religion occupy, or at least accommodate, this delicate position? Or is such a location effectively overruled by the presence of religious metaphysics and subsumed into a transcendent ineffable? If it is possible to admit such a position without contradicting religious faith, then should philosophy of religion identify it as proper subject matter and, though more of a practical task, could it generate a meeting of faiths? What Cooper’s delicate position creates need not be a promethean space that is set up in opposition to metaphysics, but it provokes us to consider the possibility of how the ineffable can also operate apart from metaphysics. These are questions that we will consider as we proceed, but underpinning them is a much broader debate concerning the relationship between the analytic and the phenomenological traditions in the philosophy of religion. Can phenomenology genuinely describe a sense of ‘beyond the human’ that becomes a valid field for the philosophy of religion itself? Here we give consideration to this relationship only within the remit of our interest in religious pluralism. So, in brief, if the analytic tradition seems to give priority to the challenge that pluralism poses for the objectivity or epistemology of religious beliefs,<sup>13</sup> the phenomenological tradition concentrates on the givenness or the *excess* of experiences (including non-religious) that do not appeal to metaphysics. A dialogue between these two approaches to the philosophy of religion is difficult but may yield new ways into the question of religious pluralism or, more specifically, the question of what role is played by the ineffable or the transcategorical – and of how ineffability is to be understood in relation to the transcendent and/or the immanent.

Within the analytic tradition, the concept of ineffability, or the inconceivability of the divine, is certainly alive and well in the philosophical discussion about religious pluralism. In fact, for theories of religious pluralism it is a concept that supplies a vital explanatory component. That is, ineffability provides the transcendent mystery that is deemed necessary to reduce cognitive dissonance generated from conflicting religious truth-claims while simultaneously affirming the basic *realism* of those religious claims. For example, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, in a magisterial work that has recently been translated from German into English, *God Beyond Boundaries: A Christian and Pluralist Theology of Religions* (2017), makes the following statement regarding the possibility of a pluralist theology of religions: ‘the inconceivability of transcendent reality forms the first and fundamental presupposition of a pluralist theology of religions, the critique of a pluralist theology of religions can begin with a refutation of the inconceivability and ineffability of God’.<sup>14</sup> The *use* (or work) of ineffability in this way, and Schmidt-Leukel’s acknowledgement that its refutation would serve as a defeater for pluralism, reflects the

characterization of a problem that is chiefly about resolving conflicting truth-claims about the Absolute. However, is there a tension, or paradox even, located in Schmidt-Leukel's confidence in *knowing* that divine inconceivability is a lynchpin in a theoretical construction (situated neatly in the upper storey of his two-level account), while at the same time asserting its unfathomable nature? Why is the transcategorical so conceptually neat, in this respect?

Schmidt-Leukel's own treatment of ineffability draws attention to the fact that it is already part of the common inventory of religions or the traditions of *via negativa*. This is the same approach adopted by Hick, but Hick deploys a more intensified mediational epistemology that utilizes Kant's distinction between noumena and phenomena, or rather the distinction between things as they are in themselves and things as they are perceived. Hick borrows this basic idea to suggest a distinction between the literal and metaphorical status of religious truth-claims.<sup>15</sup> According to his hypothesis, one cannot speak literally of the Real *an sich*. The language used by religions is literal at the phenomenal level of our own cultural existence but is deemed to be only mythologically true of the Real *an sich*.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the Real operates as a formal explanatory concept that transcends the concrete humanly constructed categories of religious experience which appear to contradict each other. The contradictions occur only on the ground, so to speak, whereas at the noumenal level of the ineffable, or transcategorical, Real, these contradictions do not apply.

In Hick's hypothesis, something even further removed from the experiences of the ineffable in different faiths is being proposed. Thus, Hick is clear that 'even in the profoundest unitive mysticism the mind operates with culturally specific concepts and that which is experienced is accordingly a manifestation of the Real rather than the postulated Real *an sich*'.<sup>17</sup> The awkwardness of this position is that by defending the critically realist nature of profoundly differing religious beliefs through his use of the Kantian noumenal-phenomenal structure, Hick is forced into making the Real so obscure a concept that he has been accused of 'transcendental agnosticism'.<sup>18</sup> Even a critic as sympathetic to pluralism as Peter Byrne has recognized that 'the scepticism implied by Hick's distinction between the noumenal phenomenal transcendent is severe'.<sup>19</sup> This also means that influential hypotheses like Hick's do not lead us anywhere; or rather, there cannot be a religious *programme* as such. If we compare it to the ultimism proposed by philosophers like John Schellenberg who maintain that the proper goal of philosophy (and therefore a true form of religion, according to him) is to pursue the ultimate point, this could be understood as a shared goal or quest, but this *cannot* be the case regarding the 'Real' in view of its formal function in Hick's Kantian system, which places it categorically beyond reach.

### **The disappointment of religious pluralism**

Others have already drawn attention to the sheer disappointment at the agnosticism about the transcendent in Hick's type of philosophical pluralism.<sup>20</sup>

That is, if religion may be characterized as a search to get beyond the human and into the ultimate, then pluralism appears to move the ultimate even further away. Religions think that they tell the truth about the way things really are; moreover, they believe that revelation can break the veil of ignorance. Although the ineffable is an acknowledged aspect of religious traditions themselves in their discourse about the ultimate, such 'ineffables' do not enjoy an absolute status in systems like Hick's. Instead, they are regarded as *phenomenological* manifestations of what George Mavrodes has called the 'super-transcendent'.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, it is misleading for pluralists to claim that their use of ineffability is merely continuous with the use of it in the religions themselves. They claim a step further: a formal conceptual embargo that makes definitive revelation inadmissible.

However, I want to suggest that there is another kind of disappointment that stems from the way that pluralism acts as an anaesthetic for the actual meeting of religions which makes the meeting of religions oddly unproductive. So, how does Hick's treatment of the phenomenological level affect the interactions *between* religions? Whereas it is offered as an explanatory model, what are the empirical consequences? Even if Hick could maintain that the phenomenal manifestations are real for those experiencing them, the caveat is surely located in the fact that one can *in principle* move to a different phenomenon (i.e. convert from one religion to another) without changing from 'the Real' to something else.<sup>22</sup> Because the noumenal ground is understood to be transcategorical and, moreover, religious representations of the transcategorical Real cannot be understood to enjoy more than a metaphorical status, there is no reason to convert or change faiths – other than finding a discourse that suits our personal disposition and development, or reflects the wider cultural systems in which we find ourselves. It seems to have potentially self-defeating consequences for the actual dialogue between religions. That is, our concrete beliefs become ultimately inconsequential in such conversations.

This becomes all the more paradoxical when we realize that one of the motivations for pluralism, besides seeking formally to defend the cognitivism of religious truth-claims in light of contradictory plural testimony, is to encourage mutual *recognition*.<sup>23</sup> In light of the pluralist metaphysical systems in play, this generates the experientially odd consequence that it is the acknowledgement of the *inadequacy* of each other's religious beliefs that makes them equally legitimate in the other's eyes.<sup>24</sup> Byrne also worries that pluralism might simply behave as a 'species of philosophical scepticism about first order religious claims'.<sup>25</sup> If this is the case, we are trained by Hick's hypothesis to recoil at the possibility that one of us might have more truth about the Real than someone else. At least, it appears that the terms of reference of such conversations cannot permit *outstanding* or wholly unique experiences.

As we have said, such a policy of scepticism about each other's claims flows naturally from a tactical epistemological use of ineffability to provide an explanatory structure for a plurality of truth-claims. Both Schmidt-Leukel and Hick are entirely consistent with this when it comes to their comments on the practical task of

interreligious spirituality. Thus, Schmidt-Leukel is clear that the purpose of inter-religious encounter cannot be to 'learn more and something new about the Divine as it is in itself'. Instead, 'we are more likely to learn more and something new about how humans have experienced transcendent reality'.<sup>26</sup> Once again, he clearly acknowledges this when he suggests that 'we will learn less about ultimate reality but more about "faith in its many forms"'.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Hick's carefully crafted description of interreligious spirituality as 'basically trusting and hopeful and stirred by a sense of joy in celebration of the goodness, *from the human point of view*, of the ultimately Real'<sup>28</sup> is effectively offered more as a tribute to human religiosity than as any insight into the Real. Schmidt-Leukel earnestly speaks of a curiosity about the practices and beliefs of others. However, what are we supposed to be curious about? We already know that curiosity about the Real *an sich* is likely to be disappointed by the embargoes that Hick's hypothesis imposes, so it can only be a curiosity that is driven to examine or explore behaviours similar (or dissimilar) to our own. In addition to this, we saw that Schmidt-Leukel claimed that the failure of pluralism would be evident if a refutation of the inconceivability of the divine succeeded. So, how can the sharing of our experiences or dialogue usefully communicate *anything* about a reality that is transcategorical without breaking this rule? Such communications are fruitless and we cannot know if we are growing closer – there is no sense of knowing what 'convergence' between religions might entail in terms of growing closer to 'ultimate' truth.

The fundamental problem is that pluralism proposed by Hick and Schmidt-Leukel sets up the relationship between the ineffable and the phenomena in a way that means that religions are being invited to engage and exchange with each other in their phenomenological manifestations without insight being permitted about the upper storey. Consequentially, if we take any emergent interreligious spirituality we must say that it is ultimately unilluminating because, even if an interreligious or convergent spirituality does emerge from the phenomenological engagements, such spiritualities are not given the status of *advancing* the knowledge of the pluralist's noumenal object. They are not closer to the 'Real'. Neither do they influence the shape of the pluralist's model.

Hick's transcategorical never exceeds its well-defined function, i.e. a formal explanatory device. In this sense, its 'work' is locked in. His strategy when defending his use of ineffability is to formalize the concept further. Thus, against the claim that he cannot speak of the ineffable without compromising its unknowability, he makes a distinction between substantive and formal attributes:

There are what we can call substantial attributes, which would tell us something about what the Godhead in itself is like – for example, that it is personal or that it is impersonal. And there are what I have called formal attributes, which do not tell us anything about what the Godhead in itself is like. Thus for example, that it can be referred to does not give us any information about its nature. Formal attributes are thus trivial or inconsequential in that nothing significant follows from them concerning the intrinsic nature of the Godhead.<sup>29</sup>

In this way, Hick argues that he is able to speak of the transcategorical Real without inadvertently adding qualities to it. But this just accentuates the numbing effect of the Real's formality.<sup>30</sup> Is there something overly rigid about the ineffable being conceptualized like this? The paradox in Hick's postulate is that his transcategorical – the Real – which he describes mystically as neither 'one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive',<sup>31</sup> is nonetheless presented as the 'simplest'<sup>32</sup> account of plurality and that a 'single Real . . . is the most economical'<sup>33</sup> version of events.<sup>34</sup> A remarkably static portrayal.

Because the 'concrete' experiences of the phenomenal world are structured by our own conceptual frameworks according to this system,<sup>35</sup> it means that the possibility of experiencing the world in ways that *exceed* our own conceptual frameworks is not permitted. And this brings us to the question of how mystery is generated, how it presents itself to us, how we respond to its presence, and whether or not it operates only at the *upper storey* of the two-level reality (noumenal-phenomenal). So, is there another way of considering the transcategorical in the context of religious pluralism as an experience of *excess* that emerges out of the midst of our interreligious engagements with its complexity of the everyday, multiple sensory, cognitive, non-cognitive, natural and human, individual, cultural and social inputs and even, perhaps, Cooper's delicate metaphysical position? Put simply, should the *work* of the pluralist's transcategorical be concentrated solely in its formal role as an epistemologically pristine noumenal postulate or, instead, be something phenomenologically *overwhelming* – an excess in the midst? Is the disappointment of Hick's noumenal-phenomenal construction mitigated by the possibility that religions might, as we have said, *generate what is ineffable about their meeting*? Here some comments by Dietrich Bonhoeffer are indicative of the sense intended: 'The beyond is not what is infinitely remote, but what is nearest at hand.'<sup>36</sup> Similarly: 'The transcendent is not the infinite, unattainable tasks, but the neighbour within reach in any given situation.'<sup>37</sup> Bonhoeffer's statements are not a call to divert attention away from the ineffable, but present a challenge as to where to look for it. In what follows, we shall seek to elaborate this by exploring the contribution of the French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion.

## II

### **Kant in a different key**

If Hick borrows Kant's noumenal-phenomenal distinction to construct his pluralistic hypothesis with its division between the Real as it is and the Real as it is experienced, Jean-Luc Marion finds in Kant a warrant for his influential notion of 'saturated phenomena', the experience of being bedazzled, the experience of givenness and excess. Put another way, if Hick keeps his distance formally from the ineffable, Marion prefers full immersion. For Marion, we are the 'given-to', and the given-to is overwhelmed ('saturated') by the object. To be clear, this is



not true of all cases. He thinks there are degrees of phenomenality, ranging from poor or common phenomena such as logic and mathematics which do not need much more than a 'concept alone' to show themselves,<sup>38</sup> to saturated phenomena – such as revelatory experiences – where 'intuition surpasses the intention'.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, Marion's construction is different from Hick's account of things known according to 'the mode of the knower',<sup>40</sup> which would seem to bestow a great deal of legislative power on the perceptual structuring of our human psychology and consciousness. Marion is resistant to this idea – the given-to is emphatically not empowered:

givenness precedes intuition and abolishes its Kantian limits, because the fact of being given to consciousness (in whatever manner) testifies to the right of phenomena to be received as such, that is to say, as they give themselves. To return to the things themselves amounts to recognizing phenomena as themselves, without submitting them to the (sufficient) condition of an anterior authority (such as the thing in itself, cause, principle, etc.).<sup>41</sup>

Marion finds the origin of his doctrine of saturated phenomena in Kant's critique of aesthetic ideas. He notes that in the Kantian view it is not the intuition but the concept which is lacking. Kant says that 'by an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination which evokes much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. *concept*, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never quite fully capture or render completely intelligible'.<sup>42</sup> Marion seizes upon Kant's comment 'evokes much thought', and is also drawn to a further statement in which Kant argues that the aesthetic idea might be called 'an *inexponible* representation of the imagination'.<sup>43</sup> Marion translates *inexponible* as 'inexposable' and suggests that herein is located the notion of excess: 'One can understand this in the following way: because it gives "much", the aesthetic idea gives more than any concept can expose; to "expose" here amounts to arranging (ordering) the intuitive given according to rules.'<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps it is in this statement that we find the crux of the tension between the religious pluralists that we discussed above and the phenomenologist. Of course, philosophers will be drawn to that which evokes much thought, but the notion that this 'idea' gives more than concepts can contain or reveal may be hard to swallow. However, many philosophers of religion from the analytic tradition seem prepared to acknowledge the idea that truth is something that is not wholly captured by the rational process. For example, there is John Cottingham's call for a more humane philosophy of religion that reverses the positivists' verificationist demands in favour of *understanding*.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, since metaphysics is often associated with investigations concerning objectivity or mind-independent reality *behind* appearances, analytic philosophers of religion are likely to conflict with the orthodox phenomenology defined by Edmund Husserl's 'principle of all principles' where we get back to (a reduction to) the things themselves and the 'principle of sufficient reason is not required on top of what we directly self-intuit'.<sup>46</sup> Most importantly, as nothing is required 'on top', all intuition occurs only against the

horizon of immanence and finitude, i.e. the spatio-temporal horizon that is the limit. That is, Husserl's rigorous science makes it clear that what we intuit 'is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, *but* also only within the limits in which it is presented there'.<sup>47</sup>

Going further than Husserl, the new phenomenologists share a predilection for overstatement, excess, and hyperbole. Moreover, religious experience is 'always depicted in superlative terms'.<sup>48</sup> It is for this reason that I proposed earlier that the approach of the new phenomenologists would appear to be a discourse that is well suited to religious pluralism. Marion asks: 'Can the givenness in presence of each thing be realized without any condition or restriction?'<sup>49</sup> If phenomenology is concerned with reduction (back to the things themselves) then surely, he argues, this phenomenological reduction needs to continue to strip away conceptual obstructions in order to allow the thing to *give itself*. That is, Marion's radical proposal is that the sheer givenness of a phenomenon 'means freeing it from the limits of every other authority, including those of intuition'.<sup>50</sup>

For our purposes, Marion's ideas of excess seem like a vivification of the ineffable in contrast to Hick's formal regulating concept. If we hope that ineffability can do some work, and not just serve as a philosophical noumenal device, then it seems that the work of the phenomenologists has something to contribute. This is not to propose that the theoretical conditions of truth can or should be brushed aside, but that the phenomenological description of the givenness of religious experience, especially the excess of what is given, may suggest a more authentic starting point for religious believers – and a necessary datum for philosophers of religion – when it comes to the recognition of 'things that are not under our control'.<sup>51</sup> This is a better location for philosophical reflection on diversity just because the experiences of interreligious meeting or spirituality do not always arise out of deliberate 'positioning' (either intellectual or experiential) but from the embedded contexts, events, and happenings that occur.

Such recognition is, I would argue, descriptive of a genuine *experience* of religious pluralism rather than the philosophical idol of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. For phenomenologists like Marion, the excess of intuition we experience when looking at a spectacular landscape painting, or the dazzling apprehension of the face of one we love, or the yet deeper intimation of a divinely benevolent invisible gaze, are all 'saturated phenomena' that build towards a realization that 'comes down to thinking seriously "that than which none greater can be conceived [*aliquid quo majus cogitari nequit*]" – which means thinking it as the final possibility of phenomenology'.<sup>52</sup> The dynamic that is suggested here is intriguing if rather poetic. Marion appears to be proposing that the experience of saturated phenomena is something that makes one receptive to that which exceeds all – Anselm's 'that than which none greater can be conceived'. Put another way, the formal category of Hick's transcategorial is turned into a living phenomenological possibility.

So, returning to the issues of religious pluralism and ineffability, if there is such a thing as an experience of religious pluralism then may we describe it as something

that 'evokes much thought', an experience that seems to overflow marked-out territories? For philosophers of religion, one such marked-out territory would be the underlying 'exclusivist, inclusivist or pluralist' paradigm that maps the problem of conflicting truth-claims into neat camps. But this is precisely the sort of mapping that appears inadmissible in terms of Marion's saturated phenomena because the experience of pluralism – taken by itself – gives *more* than any description or resolution of it: a matter less focused on conceptual hygiene and more on some experience of *excess* that emerges from the events of engagement.

The 'event' is an important trope in Marion's thinking.<sup>53</sup> It is one of the main examples he uses to illustrate the concept of saturated phenomena. He discusses this chiefly in two important works, *In Excess* (2002a) and *Being Given* (2002b). First, he analyses the event as something that simply *happens*. That is, he wishes to stress the sheer givenness of the event by distancing it from a mere effect (which is the consequence of a cause), or other such reasons for its occurrence:

[The event] does not result from a production, which would deliver it as a product, decided and foreseen, foreseeable according to its causes and as a consequence reproducible following the repetition of such causes. To the contrary, in happening, it attests to an unforeseeable origin, rising up from causes unknown, even absent, at least not assignable, that one would not therefore any longer reproduce . . .<sup>54</sup>

Second, in his treatment of saturated phenomena in *Being Given*, Marion analyses aspects of saturation based on Kantian categories of quantity, quality, relation, and modality.<sup>55</sup> For Marion, the event 'saturates the category of quantity'. Or rather, events are impossible to contain or describe in terms that privilege one narrative. To illustrate this, he takes historical events which, although identifiable, are 'not limited to an instant, a place, or an empirical individual, but overflows these singularities and becomes epoch-making in time . . ., covers a physical space such that no gaze encompasses it with one sweep'.<sup>56</sup> So, the Great War of 1914–1918 did not arise due to a single cause, such as the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, but from an 'overabundance of available causes'<sup>57</sup> that are difficult to contain or organize. Similarly, given this excess in origin, context – past, present and future, we must conclude that 'nobody ever *saw* the Battle of Waterloo',<sup>58</sup> as if the event itself possesses a clear and distinct identity. In this sense, events are resistant to clear conceptual grasp or articulation: they have the quality of ineffability. The point is not that someone could not have experienced the battle, but that there was no 'essence' of the Battle of Waterloo that could be seen. That is, there is no definitive sense in which one individual could say that they 'saw' the Battle of Waterloo (as an essence). Instead, it was an event that contained many causes and points of view, an excess of viewpoints, a surplus of perspectives, and this means that the event was a saturated phenomenon. One could be at the battle but not encapsulate it. The connection with our current concerns is that this seems to me to describe a way of understanding

the 'transcategorical' as an *experience* of interreligious excess (which is not contained by a concept), thus breaking out of Hick's quasi-Kantian limitations that place the Real out of reach in a 'noumenal'. The Real becomes a living experienced Reality (rather than a formal upper-storey postulate). It is experienceable following Kant's philosophy of aesthetics (that which 'evokes much thought'), rather than Hick's quasi-Kantian distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal.

Perhaps the most important suggestion that Marion makes in connection to our interests in religious pluralism is: 'nobody can claim for himself a "here and now" that would permit him to describe it exhaustively and constitute it as an object'.<sup>59</sup> The sheer quantity of an event forbids us from definitively claiming to know, still less own, what is the *totality* of an event. Indeed, the event contains a 'surplus of effects', it is a *fait accompli*, unrepeatable, unforeseeable, and unique.<sup>60</sup> Here, I suggest, is an account that might authentically describe the 'event' of interreligious meetings. Perhaps the experience of meeting the other either in the form of a staged public event, an unexpected attentiveness to the words of joint prayers, or the devotions shown in other traditions, surprising participations in practices or rituals (perhaps at funerals or weddings), an illuminating meeting around scriptures, unforeseen doctrinal alignments, shared vision for endeavours – for justice or liberation, or private interreligious friendships that seem to transcend the differences or 'evoke much thought'. It is this that we are referring to when we think of what is ineffable about the actual concrete meetings of religions themselves.

Going further, according to Marion's description of a saturated event, the event itself does not deliver anything definitive that would compel participants to agree on a certain meaning or outcome. In this sense, we cannot take the view that any one of the perspectives on the event is decisive. The participants experience the overabundance of each event, its momentary uniqueness, from their own perspective without further explanation of its origin or destination. Events are not controlled by our rational cognition of them, rather we are changed by the event itself. Relating to the interests of the present article, even if a religion approaches the other from within a certain horizon determined by that religion, perhaps with a predetermined idea about the other (e.g. 'anonymous Christians'), we can say that Marion's analysis suggests that the 'saturation' that is the event of meeting possesses a givenness that exceeds such horizons. On an individual level, the believer does not construct an interfaith posture – perhaps self-identifying as a pluralist – rather they simply receive whatever is given in terms of the event itself. Translating this to the task of the philosopher of religion, I would argue that the interreligious event is neither preceded nor concluded by a typological question (for example, whether it exhibits exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism); instead the event itself contains its own power and meaning that cannot be contained but is a gift to the participant ('called into being'). This is the experience of the transcategorical in the phenomenon and I would propose that it characterizes the 'work' of ineffability in the context of the interreligious event.

What implication does this have for method in the philosophy of religion in general and for the philosophical study of pluralism in particular? Our discussion has highlighted some differences between certain analytic approaches and the phenomenological one. Viewed in relation to the pluralistic hypothesis advanced by Hick and Schmidt-Leukel, such interfaith 'events' might be viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*, or rather they take on a significance because they are deemed to illustrate a deeper pluralist or universal reality to which they bear witness. However, our consideration of the phenomenological view suggests that, if taken as they appear in themselves, such events might enjoy a greater liberty. That is, phenomenology 'goes beyond metaphysics insofar as it gives up the transcendental project in order to allow the development of a finally radical empiricism'.<sup>61</sup> Or further, the phenomenologist wishes to return ownership of the 'appearing' to what appears and 'phenomenality to the phenomenon'.<sup>62</sup>

Even so, what we glean from Marion is not necessarily a straightforward preclusion of transcendence but (even though he might share the Husserlian principles of immanence) the concept of saturated phenomena enables us to conceptualize (or speak of, or refer to) a new kind of subjectivity – the *given-to* subjectivity – that finds itself saturated by the object (or event). Thus, Thomas Carlson brings out Marion's actual intention to surpass metaphysics when he speaks of Marion's rejection of the 'characteristically metaphysical subjection of the absolute or the unconditional . . . to the preconditions and limits of human thought and language'.<sup>63</sup> What Marion attempts to prohibit is not transcendence as such, but the ability for us to contain our experience within the limits of our ability to conceptualize the experience. Moreover, if we recall Cooper's delicate metaphysical position which acknowledges the ineffable to be a subtle sense of 'beyond the human', we see that a great deal more is opened up by the notion of excess or saturation than is intentionally captured by *interreligious* dialogue understood within the theology of religions and the soteriological emphases often associated with it.

### Conclusion

We opened this article by questioning the validity of *Kant-rationality* for the task of considering the complexity of the global phenomenon of religion and for rationalizing the facts of religious pluralism in particular. The search for a universal standard or agreed rational foundation is, from a phenomenological perspective, an odd movement of thought in the context of pluralism. Whereas in the analytic context the emphasis is placed on acquiring a total account within the boundaries of 'sufficient reason', the phenomenological places the emphasis on the givenness of the things themselves, or 'sufficient intuition' (Marion).<sup>64</sup> However, we have also suggested that ineffability might be productive for religious pluralism if it occupies a location set in the midst of engagement rather than operating as a formal postulate safely consigned to the unexperienceable beyond.

Phenomenologists like Marion highlight what analytic approaches do not capture. Phenomenology may simply reveal *more* and be better suited to religious expression and for describing the events of interreligious engagement. Its effervescent descriptions are strangely fitting for religious awe, everyday ambiguity and, perhaps, the complex surplus that is the experience of religious diversity. Additionally, ineffability is not necessarily the sole possession of a religious discourse and can speak of mystery without metaphysical commitments; or rather, it is not exhausted by the 'upper storey' location. In this sense, the phenomenological contribution asks us to consider the possibility of experiences that *overflow* categories. The transcategorical operates in the midst of the phenomenon, or the 'event', and is given to the participants. This transcategorical phenomenal, the ground-up Real, could be the proper starting point for a new pluralistic hypothesis.

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## NOTES

1. Wolterstorff (2011), 264. Wolterstorff is also dismissive in this piece about Kant's epistemological doctrines, which he claims 'have never gained much purchase among analytic philosophers' (*ibid.*, 257).
2. Bennett-Hunter (2016b), 1267.
3. For example, Bennett-Hunter asks: 'Why invoke the concept of ineffability in *any* context, presenting it for human evaluation, when its content, or rather its lack of content, entails that it cannot do any "work" and thus in principle precludes such evaluation?' (Bennett-Hunter (2005), 493).
4. See Alston (1956) and Hick (2000).
5. This is the position taken by Hick (2000), who argues that one can overcome the apparent contradiction about speaking about ineffability by distinguishing between formal and substantial predicates. For a critique of this view, see Gäb (2017).
6. See Bennett-Hunter (2016a), esp. 'Introduction'.
7. For some examples, see the work of Pierre Hadot, Mark Wynn, and John Cottingham.
8. Cooper (2005), 125.
9. Cooper (2009), 54.
10. Cooper (2005), 134, citing Heidegger (1977), 18.
11. Cooper (2005), 136.
12. *Ibid.*, 137.
13. For example, Peter Byrne, who is sympathetic to (though not uncritical of) a pluralistic reading of religion, argues that if pluralism is located within the analytic tradition 'then it principally rests upon and speaks about matters of epistemology' (Byrne (1995), 26).
14. Schmidt-Leukel (2017a), 185–186.
15. To be clear, Hick is not pretending to engage in any great detail with Kant's ideas here. Nevertheless, he is aware that he inherits the difficulties that face Kant.
16. See Hick (2004), esp. chs 14, 15, and 16.
17. *Ibid.*, 295. See pp. 292–295 for full discussion.
18. D'Costa (1996), 228.
19. Byrne (1995), 154.
20. George Mavrodes describes this well when he argues that: 'The Real is religiously attractive because of the deep religious orientation toward what is real. The suggestion, therefore that there is something still more real than the religious object will be intolerable to many believers' (Mavrodes (1993), 203).
21. See *ibid.*, 179–203.
22. That is, so long as the tradition we belong to fosters a movement towards 'reality-centredness', our conversions make no difference to the *validity* of our response to the Real. However, the difficulty is that if

- the Real is truly transcategorical, then it seems contradictory to claim to know what might constitute 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' responses to it.
23. Or rather, as Roger Trigg has observed, pluralists like Hick want 'to legitimize different religions in the eyes of each other' (Trigg (2014), 54).
  24. Peter Byrne notices the following paradox:
 

If pluralism is true, then rich, living, doctrinally loaded accounts of the nature of transcendent reality and of salvation are both necessary and necessarily flawed. They are necessary for the moulding of the practical and experiential complexes by means of which humankind can genuinely relate to the sacred. They are inevitably flawed, for from the nature of the case they cannot claim strict truth with any certainty. (Byrne (1995), 200)
  25. *Ibid.*, 15. In context, Byrne is discussing pluralism as a workable philosophical hypothesis about religion; he is not addressing the issues of interreligious dialogue that we are concerned with here.
  26. Schmidt-Leukel (2017a), 221.
  27. Schmidt-Leukel (2017b), 145.
  28. Hick (2004), 380. My emphasis.
  29. Hick (2000), 41.
  30. See Hick's discussion about criteria in Hick (2004), esp. chs 17 and 18.
  31. Hick (2004), 246.
  32. *Ibid.*, 248.
  33. *Ibid.*, xxvii.
  34. Robert Lehe discusses Byrne's view that Hick's Real is too ineffable in Lehe (2014), 509.
  35. Hick (2004), 246.
  36. Cited in Hart (2009), 188.
  37. Bonhoeffer (1967), 187.
  38. Marion (2002b), 222.
  39. *Ibid.*, 226.
  40. Hick (2004), 241. Hick's notion of 'experiencing-as' applies at *all levels* of our experiencing.
  41. Marion (2008), 4–5.
  42. Kant (2007), 142.
  43. *Ibid.*, 170.
  44. Marion (2008), 33.
  45. Cottingham (2014), 171
  46. Simmons (2008), 912. It would be hasty to insist that all analytic philosophy is at odds with phenomenology. For example, see Trakakis (2014) where he seeks to draw parallels between phenomenological thought and Reformed Epistemology.
  47. Husserl (1982), 44.
  48. Gschwandtner (2012), 287.
  49. Marion (1998), 1.
  50. Marion (2002b), 17.
  51. Caputo (2003), 139.
  52. Marion (2008), 48.
  53. We might have considered his treatment of the icon, but the notion of the event or happening seems to capture the moments of engagement that we are trying to highlight here.
  54. Marion (2002a), 31.
  55. Marion (2002b), esp. Book IV.
  56. *Ibid.*, 228.
  57. See *ibid.*, 168.
  58. *Ibid.*, 228.
  59. *Ibid.*
  60. Marion (2002a), 36.
  61. Marion (2008), 57.
  62. *Ibid.*, 21.
  63. Carlson (2001), xvi.
  64. See Marion (2008), 5.