

On blanket statements about the epistemic effects of religious diversity

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Abstract: Religious diversity poses a challenge to the view that exclusive religious beliefs can be justified and warranted. Equally upright and thoughtful people who appear to possess similarly well-grounded and coherent systems of belief, come up with irreconcilable religious views. The content of religious beliefs also seems unduly dependent upon culture, and no one religion has been shown to be more transformative than the others. Philosophers have recently made at least three kinds of claims about the effects of diversity on exclusive religious beliefs, and five kinds of claims about the proper effect of diversity on exclusivists themselves. Since there are numerous factors that can influence the epistemic impact of religious diversity on exclusive beliefs, each kind of blanket pronouncement made about the epistemic effects of religious diversity is inadequate.

Introduction

Some philosophers believe that exclusive religious beliefs, such as ‘Christ is the unique incarnation of God’, can be justified and known, even though these beliefs do not rest on evidence that would convince all reasonable people. Religious diversity is a challenge to this claim. The religious beliefs of sincere, intelligent people contradict the religious beliefs of other such people, and yet their beliefs appear similarly coherent and equally well grounded.¹ Add to this the fact that a strong correlation exists between one’s culture and one’s religious beliefs,² and the fact that as far as we can tell no one religion is clearly more transformative than the others,³ and it seems as though the exclusive religious believer (who is aware of diversity) is arbitrarily favouring her own view. When those who hold exclusive religious beliefs become aware of religious diversity, how can their exclusive beliefs remain justified?

An exclusive religious belief is commonly described as a religious belief that implies the falseness of contrary teachings. ‘Christ is the unique incarnation of

God' certainly fits this description, yet the pluralist belief that 'Christ, Allah, Krishna, and Amaterasu are all really names of the same God' also fits, since it implies that those who believe in the unique ultimacy of their God are mistaken. While the second example does imply that many Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Shintoists are mistaken, it is thought by some to validate much of what people in these other religions believe, at least more so than the first.⁴ Others have argued that statements like the second are every bit as exclusive as statements like the first, and that they are just as vulnerable to epistemic damage from the facts of diversity.⁵ We do not need to resolve this debate here.

Suffice it to say, the exclusive belief thought to be negatively impacted by diversity is one that by itself, or in conjunction with the rest of one's exclusive beliefs, implies that *many* or *most* of the central beliefs of other religions are false. One who holds such a belief or set of beliefs is a *doxastic* exclusivist. (She is to be distinguished from the *soteriological* exclusivist, who holds that salvation can be achieved only by following one's own faith, as well as the *hard* or *experiential* exclusivist, who believes that only adherents of one's own religion can experience God or divine reality.)

Most would agree that doxastic exclusivistic beliefs can be justified when the believer is unaware of religious diversity. However, when she is made aware of religious diversity, it seems that her exclusivist beliefs could *not* be justified given that the nature of the evidence in their favour is counterbalanced by equally good evidence for opposing viewpoints. And in order for the intelligent, reflective exclusivist to maintain that her exclusive beliefs are justified and warranted, she would have to think that the beliefs of those with opposing religious viewpoints – who by all objective accounts seem to be her epistemic peers – do *not* enjoy such positive epistemic status, and additionally that her exclusive belief-forming processes are reliable while those of others aren't. She does not have good non-question-begging evidence for these further claims any more than she does for the exclusive belief itself. Isn't she stubbornly and arbitrarily favouring her own views?

William Alston and Kelly James Clark argue that exclusive beliefs remain rational and justified in the face of diversity, though Alston acknowledges that the justification of such beliefs is 'diminished'.⁶ Gary Gutting, John Mackie, Joseph Runzo, J. L. Schellenberg, David Silver, and (arguably) John Hick hold that the facts of religious diversity comprise a defeater for exclusive religious beliefs. Alston, David Basinger, William Hasker, Robert McKim, and Warren Steinkraus suggest that exclusivists have an obligation to reassess exclusive beliefs and compare the evidence in their favour to that for opposing views. Gutting, McKim, Terence Penelhum, and Runzo state that when exposed to diversity one should hold any exclusivistic beliefs tentatively. Silver and Julian Willard argue that the exclusivist should try to stop forming and holding such beliefs. Some suggest that the exclusivist should feel troubled and others that she should alter her religious

activities. Each of these views illuminates the epistemic impact of diversity to a certain degree, but each overlooks exceptions and the variety of epistemic circumstances and agents.

A few philosophers have avoided making claims that lump together all exclusivists and exclusivistic beliefs. For instance, Alvin Plantinga writes:

[The religious exclusivist] might be such that if he *hadn't* known the facts of pluralism, then he would have known [his exclusivistic beliefs], but now that he *does* know those facts, he doesn't know [his exclusivistic beliefs]. Things *could* go this way with the exclusivist. On the other hand, they *needn't* go this way.⁷

William Lad Sessions likewise qualifies his claim about the effects of diversity: 'My contentions ... are that there are no real obstacles, and there may be real incentives, for *many* properly basic Christians to engage in serious interreligious inquiry' [my emphasis].⁸ Philip Quinn also provides a nuanced position: 'It may turn out that, for *some* people, neither evil, nor projective explanations nor religious diversity by itself makes it rational or justified to accept a defeater of properly basic theistic belief' [my emphasis].⁹ Finally, Jerome Gellman has recently qualified his previous defence of religious exclusivism:¹⁰ 'I do not intend to endorse contentedness as a rational policy for all exclusivists. My argument is with the philosophical view that contented exclusivism must always fall short of full rationality A contented exclusivist *need not* be derelict in any epistemic obligations' [my emphasis].¹¹ Each of these authors acknowledges the challenge of diversity while not asserting that some effect applies to all exclusivists and their beliefs.

In the following, I begin by clarifying senses of the term 'justification', and then lay out eleven factors that influence the epistemic impact of religious diversity on exclusivistic beliefs. I present and then reject eight kinds of blanket statements made about the epistemic consequences of diversity, and then comment on what we *can* say about the effects of diversity on the epistemic status of exclusive beliefs as well as on exclusivists themselves.

Justification

Some define 'justification' in an *internal* sense, as being within one's epistemic rights or as believing well given one's perspective. A belief is justified in this sense if, given her evidence, the believer should expect that her belief is likely to be true. Internal justification does not fill the gap between true belief and knowledge. One's beliefs can be true, and one can be rightly convinced that they are, and yet still fail to have knowledge because of factors not recognizable from one's perspective. One might possess an unrecognized cognitive defect, or lack crucial information, or be in misleading circumstances.

Some in this discussion use 'justification' in the internal sense, and others use 'justification' as that which *does* fill the gap between true belief and knowledge.

Justification in this latter sense involves one not only believing well, given one's perspective, but also things beyond one's perspective falling into place, enabling one to know. One's belief might be reliably formed, or formed by properly functioning cognitive faculties, or be indefeasible, or be formed in a non-misleading environment. For the purpose of clarity I will use 'warrant' to refer to internal/external justification, that which together with true belief yields knowledge, and I will use 'justification' to refer to internal justification.¹² Often I will use 'epistemic status' to refer to both.

Eleven factors that affect the epistemic impact of diversity on exclusive religious beliefs

Introduction

In this section I suggest that there are at least eleven factors that can influence the epistemic status of exclusive religious beliefs, as well as the impact of religious diversity on that status. If these factors apply to one's belief, one can at least have an implicit awareness of this fact. This awareness is important since it does seem that for a circumstance to have a positive impact on *justification*, the subject must to some degree be aware of that circumstance, or if the impact is negative, it must be that at least she *should* have been aware of it.

It would be a mistake, however, to restrict influence on justification to cases where one is explicitly aware of the influential factors or of their relationship to the justification of one's beliefs. When an intuitive person who has worked with the homeless for years refuses to help a certain man, might not her belief that it is the best thing to do be justified, even if she has never explicitly identified her intuitive talents nor the specific factors that determine when she helps and doesn't – and even if, upon reflection, she is not able to do so? Likewise, an intuitive person not given to reflection could have a veridical, special connection to God or divine reality and have a real sense of that connection, even if he never thinks about it as such nor explicitly scrutinizes it. This implicit awareness of the connection would clearly have a positive influence on the epistemic status of his religious beliefs and could decrease any potential epistemic impact from the facts of diversity. Where below I make comments like, 'The exclusivist's belief might still be justified', I am assuming that he at least has an implicit awareness of the relevant epistemic circumstances.

Now let us turn to the factors that influence the impact of diversity on exclusive religious beliefs. The influence of each factor is *ceteris paribus*; no one factor completely determines the epistemic effect of diversity on the justification or warrant of exclusivistic beliefs. In the next section I present eight kinds of blanket statements made about the effects of diversity, statements that are inadequate because they ignore the factors presented here.

Epistemic attitudes, preparation, and virtue

The same proposition might be justified and warranted for one person and not another, even when both have access to the same evidence. Suppose I acquire the same financial information for Apple Computers as Scott Johnston, founder of Sterling Financial Group. While we each have the same access to evidence that Apple is a good buy, Johnston detects aspects of the evidence that I carelessly overlook. I look at the price/earnings ratio and the cash flow, and even though this evidence is ambiguous, I base my belief that Apple is a good buy on it. Johnston notices that the company has recently replaced equipment, which makes the numbers more encouraging. While Johnston and I have access to the same information, he is more attentive, and so his belief that Apple is a good buy is justified and warranted whereas mine is not. If Johnston and I each were to hear that others disagreed with our assessment, the epistemic status of his belief would suffer less damage. Alternatively, suppose that Johnston and I *do* access the exact same public evidence concerning the company. His belief about the stock still might have more epistemic status and more immunity to impact from a diversity of opinions, since Johnston has years of preparation that inform his analysis of the evidence and this training gives him additional insights to which I am not privy.

The application to religious beliefs is that the more humble, honest, meticulous, and prepared one is in forming exclusive beliefs, the less the impact of religious diversity on the epistemic status of those beliefs. Some people are exclusivists out of arrogance, stubbornness, laziness, or self-deception, and thus their exclusive beliefs have a lower epistemic status in light of diversity than those of the epistemically virtuous person. Some people of normal abilities, because of their epistemic virtue or their openness to religious truth, might be better situated for grasping that truth than others of similar natural abilities. C. Stephen Evans rejects the assumption that the skills required for attaining advanced religious knowledge are widely held:

This assumption ... looks dubious in light of actual religious traditions, which often stress how difficult it is to become the kind of person one must become to acquire religious truth. Years of meditation, ritual participation, or saintly, sacrificial living are often said to be prerequisites for gaining at least the higher forms of religious knowledge.¹³

If, as Bertrand Russell suggested, he were indeed to complain to God in the afterlife that he had not had enough evidence to believe, God might well ask Russell 'if he had assiduously worked at becoming the kind of person who could have recognized the evidence God had actually provided'.¹⁴

Level of religious or spiritual 'genius'

Scott Johnston has consistently outperformed other managers who are equally well trained and experienced, and he attributes this in part to instinct:

The very best managers develop a sixth sense where they just know that a stock is going to move ... We're talking art here, not science. Many have the ability, the training, the commitment, but few have the touch ... It's visceral. You just sense it. You know that a stock's got all the elements to be a winner. It just feels right; it's ready to move.¹⁵

There is then another factor – genius or instinct¹⁶ – that might cause one person's belief to enjoy more epistemic status of diverse opinions than another's, even when both have similar experience and training and are faced with the same public evidence.

When the first factor – epistemic virtue and preparation – is present, even a person of normal abilities and spiritual sensitivities, through hard work and openness, might forge a certain immunity to or lessening of the effects of diversity on her exclusive beliefs. But one might also naturally enjoy an unusual capacity when it comes to forming religious beliefs. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner defines holiness as 'standing in the presence of God', and adds that 'everyone has it, but some people have more of a knack for accessing it'.¹⁷ Just as some people have a remarkable ear for music, others might have an uncommon capacity for religious insight, and their exclusive beliefs would enjoy a more robust epistemic status, even in light of diversity.¹⁸

Personality

Let us return to the financial analogy one more time. Just as some managers are impulsive (or reserved) in a way that fits them well to make accurate predictions about stocks in current markets, some people might believe (or avoid believing) intuitively, or based on their 'passions', in a way that positions them well for discovering religious truth. As William James points out, some people believe conservatively because they are afraid of embracing something false. Others are more inclined to believe on passion or intuition, because they do not want to miss out on finding truth. Reason alone cannot always determine which attitude is more appropriate; individuals have to choose their own *modus operandi*. If one chooses well, then the epistemic status of one's exclusive beliefs will be less impacted by diversity.

The nature of one's religious experiences

Some believers report utterly transforming and self-authenticating religious experiences, while others have less amazing experiences or none at all.¹⁹ All else being equal, the more powerful one's experiences the less impact the facts of diversity will have on the epistemic status of one's exclusive beliefs. If Moses did encounter God in the burning bush on Mount Sinai, we would not expect Moses to be troubled by religious diversity (a fact of which he was certainly aware), and we wouldn't think his beliefs about Yahweh to be significantly less justified or warranted in light of it.²⁰

Self-support and social establishment

William Alston has argued cogently that the social establishment and significant self-support of one's religious belief-forming and evaluating practice (i.e. *doxastic* practice) influence the epistemic status of its output beliefs. *Self-support* for a religious doxastic practice involves it being reasonably predictive, providing useful direction for interacting with God, encouraging spiritual transformation, engendering insight into human nature, and cohering with the outputs of other established doxastic practices. A *socially established* doxastic practice is not idiosyncratic, but instead an integral part of the religious life of a community over a long period of time. All else being equal, a belief produced by a firmly entrenched, socially established religious doxastic practice that enjoys significant self-support will enjoy a better epistemic status than one produced by a doxastic practice that lacks these qualities.²¹ Religious doxastic practices vary considerably in terms of self-support and social establishment, and the impact of diversity on the epistemic status of their output beliefs will vary accordingly.

Argumentative strength

Most philosophers assume that there are no conclusive, non-question-begging arguments that show that any one religious perspective is more likely to be true than the others. However, the quality of evidence believers possess varies considerably. Some have sophisticated evidence for their beliefs, while others have little or no such evidence. Those beliefs supported with better evidence will be less impacted by diversity.

Other defeaters and resources for responding to them

Religious diversity is only one possible defeater for an exclusivistic belief. As Philip Quinn has pointed out, an exclusive belief may face the 'cumulative case' of a number of defeaters.²² Defeaters might include the problem of evil, psychoanalytic accounts of religious belief, or a lack of transformation in one's religious tradition. If one takes morally objectionable views about women, violence, race, environmental degradation, or the divine nature to be integral and normative parts of one's religion or its revelation, these facts might also serve as defeaters for one's exclusive beliefs.²³ (These defeaters, of course, might be overcome by a more nuanced account of how one should understand that revelation or religion.) Thus the number and quality of defeaters, as well as the resources one has for responding to them, can influence the epistemic status of one's exclusive religious beliefs in light of diversity.

The soteriological and experiential implications of one's views

Another kind of defeater deserves special attention. *Doxastic* exclusivism is quite separable from *soteriological* exclusivism, the view that a

person can achieve salvation only by following one's own faith, as well as *hard* exclusivism, the view that only people who embrace one's faith have any current access to the divine. Many share the intuition that it would be arbitrary and unacceptable for God to damn people because they fail to hold beliefs that, because of their culture or circumstances, would have been difficult or impossible for them to obtain. Likewise, ample evidence of transformation and wisdom exists in other traditions, and it seems unlikely that individuals from all the diverse faiths of the world except one have no contact with the divine. If one takes it to be integral to one's religious perspective that those who do not embrace something like one's perspective do not experience anything of God and in fact will be damned, this fact may well provide a defeater to one's other exclusive beliefs. The ultimate impact of the defeater will depend on whether one can either rationally support soteriological and experiential exclusivist beliefs or find a compelling way to extricate them from among one's other exclusive religious beliefs.

Having an explanation for religious diversity

It is not so much the facts of diversity alone that pose a challenge to the justification or warrant of exclusive religious beliefs, but those facts conjoined with naturalistic or pluralistic explanations. If one has a good explanation for diversity that does not undermine the justification and warrant of one's religious beliefs, then the negative impact of diversity on the epistemic status of those beliefs will be less.²⁴

One's degree of conviction

All else being equal, the epistemic status of a mild and fleeting religious conviction is more vulnerable to epistemic impact from diversity than a deep and abiding one. If a person has a weak form of belief, it is probably because her evidence is weak. The same can be said about the person who lacks affective conviction – personal commitment to her exclusive beliefs (as evidenced perhaps by their impact on her larger belief system, her actions and/or her emotions). If a person is not personally committed, at some level she may not really think the evidence for her beliefs is strong. Of course, one's confidence might be too robust given one's deficiency in terms of the factors presented above, and in such cases one's belief or level of belief might lack justification or warrant due to the epistemic effects of diversity.

The nature of one's experiences of religious diversity

If religious diversity can be a defeater for exclusivistic beliefs, the strength of that defeater will be affected by the quality of information one has about religious diversity as well as one's experiences of diversity. John Hick writes:

It was not so much new thoughts as new experiences that drew me, as a philosopher, into the issues of religious pluralism Encounters with remarkable individuals of several faiths, people whom I cannot but deeply respect, and in some cases even regard as saints, have reinforced the realisation that our very different religious traditions constitute alternative human contexts of response to the one ultimate transcendent divine reality.²⁵

It is not my intention to explore exactly what epistemic impact experiences with religious diversity have on the epistemic status of religious beliefs. As with all the factors, much will depend on the status of the others. For instance, this impact will be influenced by what antecedently seems to the believer the most plausible explanation of her experiences. In Hick's case, his experiences strongly confirmed his pre-existing pluralist explanation of religious diversity. Soteriological and experiential *inclusivists* – those who hold that while one religion best captures religious truth, all religions contain significant religious insights, and members of all religions can experience the divine – might also find confirmation in their experiences of people from diverse faiths. It does seem to me that experiences like Hick's could contribute to a significant defeater for soteriological and experiential *exclusivism*, and for the views of many *doxastic* exclusivists who cannot extricate these soteriological and experiential exclusivisms from their other exclusive beliefs. That being said, even soteriological and experiential exclusivists might have a strong exclusivistic explanation for their experiences of diversity, and this and other factors might enable their exclusive beliefs to remain justified and warranted. Experiences with those of other faiths certainly may impact the epistemic status of exclusivistic beliefs, though it is difficult to specify the nature of this impact, given the variety of possible scenarios.

Blanket statements

Introduction

Philosophers have made at least eight kinds of blanket claims about the epistemic effects of religious diversity – three kinds of claims about the effects of religious diversity on the epistemic status of exclusivistic beliefs, and five kinds of claims about the effect diversity should have on the exclusivist herself. In the previous section I argued that there are numerous factors that can influence the epistemic status of exclusive religious beliefs in the face of religious diversity. These factors likewise contribute to the precise effect (if any) the awareness of diversity should have on an exclusivist herself. While in some instances the authors of the following blanket claims might be assuming some of the considerations listed in the previous section, these blanket claims are nonetheless false and usually misleading. Some authors included below have specifically acknowledged some of the factors listed in the previous section,²⁶ but to one degree or another each has overlooked distinctions concerning the diversity of

cognitive agents and their experiences. The first three kinds of claims listed below concern the effects of diversity on the epistemic status of exclusivistic beliefs, and the latter five concern the proper effect of diversity on the exclusivist herself. In the next section I will argue that each of these kinds of claims is inadequate due to a common failure to acknowledge the variety of believers and their circumstances.

Exclusive religious beliefs remain rational, justified and warranted

Some philosophers claim that exclusive religious beliefs retain their positive epistemic status in the face of diversity. Alston writes: ‘The rational thing for a practitioner of CP [Christian doxastic practice] to do [in light of religious diversity] is to continue to form Christian M-beliefs [beliefs about God manifesting himself], and, more generally, to continue to accept, and operate in accordance with, the system of Christian belief.’²⁷ Kelly James Clark agrees: ‘Whatever warranted beliefs about God one has antecedently ... will remain warranted in the face of claims of religious diversity.’²⁸

The justification and rationality of exclusive religious beliefs is lessened

Justification and rationality are thought to come in degrees. When a belief (or epistemic practice) passes a certain *threshold* of justification or rationality we simply say that it is justified or rational. Thus, Alston holds that engaging in Christian doxastic practice is justified and rational, even though both qualities are reduced somewhat by the facts of diversity:

One’s justification for engaging in CP [Christian doxastic practice] is diminished by religious pluralism, but not to the extent of its being irrational for one to engage in that practice The facts of religious diversity do not suffice to override the positive considerations on the other side ... to such an extent as to show that the practice lacks a degree of reliability appropriate to rational acceptance.²⁹

Exclusive religious beliefs are defeated

Some hold that the facts of diversity *defeat* exclusive religious beliefs, making them irrational, unjustified, and/or unwarranted. J. L. Schellenberg writes,

Religious believers sensitive to the issue of religious diversity must find some plausible way of arguing that the ‘facts’ of pluralism ... are not facts at all ... and/or that there *are* strong independent reasons for viewing one of the relevant alternatives – their own – as epistemically preferable to the others.³⁰

Since Schellenberg thinks that exclusivists do not fulfil these requirements, their beliefs would be unjustified. David Silver concludes that ‘the facts of religious pluralism do provide a defeater for [Plantinga’s] version of Christian exclusivism, and indeed for any version of religious exclusivism that is similarly based on religious experience’.³¹ Gary Gutting asserts that exclusivistic believers

'have no right to maintain their belief without a justification',³² and that 'all our attempts to grasp the essential truth and meaning of our lives are mere guesses that we have no reason for trusting'.³³ In light of diversity, Joseph Runzo writes that exclusivism is 'neither tolerable nor any longer intellectually honest'.³⁴ John Hick writes, 'Nor can we reasonably claim that our own form of religious experience, together with that of the tradition of which we are a part, is veridical whilst others are not'.³⁵ J. L. Mackie claims that exclusive beliefs are not known: 'When the Christian says 'I know that my redeemer liveth', we must reply 'No, you don't: certainly not if you mean, by "my redeemer", Jesus as distinct from Osiris or Ashtaroth or Dionysius or Baldur or Vishnu or Amida'.³⁶

Exclusivists should be troubled by religious diversity

There are those who think that diversity should be troubling to the exclusivist. For instance, Alston writes, 'It is right and proper for one to be worried and perplexed by religious pluralism'.³⁷ Robert McKim holds that 'diversity ought to be an embarrassment to orthodoxy',³⁸ and Runzo believes that diversity 'confronts Christians with a crisis'.³⁹

Exclusive religious beliefs should be held tentatively

Some have argued that when apprised of diversity one should hold any exclusive religious beliefs tentatively. According to Runzo, 'all faith commitments must be held with the humbling recognition that they can be misguided, for our knowledge is never sure'.⁴⁰ McKim writes, 'I take the fact of religious disagreement to be a strong reason to hold one's beliefs tentatively'.⁴¹ Such a reason could theoretically be overridden, but McKim does not think sufficient non-question-begging evidence exists. Terence Penelhum agrees:

I find that my intense awareness of the multiplicity of rational alternatives makes me feel deep alienation from fellow Christians who appear to be blessed with certainty, and with a correlative perception of the obvious falsity of such alternatives. To be frank, I do not feel their certainty to *be* a blessing: better, surely, I cannot help telling myself, to be Socrates tentative than a pig without questions.⁴²

Gutting argues that *decisive* assent is called for by religious commitment, but given diversity, one can justifiably give the specific creeds of one's religion only *interim* assent. And 'those who give merely interim assent must recognize the equal value, as an essential element in the continuing discussion, of beliefs contrary to theirs'.⁴³ The only religious belief that can justifiably be given decisive assent is the largely non-exclusivistic belief that 'there is a good and powerful being concerned about us'.⁴⁴ Any more exclusive religious belief should be given only interim assent, and thus one should continue to subject it to scrutiny and investigation. McKim adds that since we probably do not have direct voluntary control over our level of conviction, religious believers should *strive* towards tentativeness.

Exclusivists should try to stop forming and holding their exclusive beliefs

David Silver writes, '[Exclusivists] should provide independent evidence for the claim that they have a special source of religious knowledge ... or they should relinquish their exclusivist religious beliefs.'⁴⁵ Julian Willard argues that when exclusivists become aware of diversity, and they (and those of whom they are aware) cannot show that their doxastic practice is more reliable than competitors, they have an epistemic obligation to 'set about abandoning their MP [mystical religious practice]'.⁴⁶ To attempt this abandonment, 'it may be best to reason with myself, or to keep myself in relative social isolation, or to distract myself from thought'.⁴⁷ One may not be able to directly change one's beliefs or patterns of thought, but indirect attempts to foster such change may succeed, and they are obligatory for exclusivists aware of diversity.

Exclusivists should reassess their beliefs and attempt epistemic peer conflict resolution

Some hold that the exclusivist should at least reassess her beliefs and attempt conciliation with opposing views. Alston writes: 'The knowledgeable and reflective Christian should ... do whatever seems feasible to search for common ground on which to adjudicate the crucial differences between the world religions, seeking a way to show in a non-circular way which of the contenders is correct.'⁴⁸ Warren Steinkraus concurs, claiming that 'if religious believers were really devoted to truth, they would at least consider alternatives'.⁴⁹ Hasker writes that 'it is exceedingly difficult to see how [the exclusivist] is going to find a satisfying resolution of the problem apart from a large-scale apologetic enterprise which will argue for the superiority of ... the particular variety of theism she espouses'.⁵⁰ McKim holds that since religious matters are 'genuinely mysterious and puzzling', and this makes religious beliefs more likely to be mistaken, one has an 'obligation to examine those beliefs'.⁵¹ He adds, 'In our era other traditions can no longer properly be dismissed or ignored'.⁵² David Basinger writes that exclusivists have 'an obligation to identify and assess the reasons why they, and those with whom they disagree, hold their respective positions'.⁵³ He adds: 'In the face of epistemic peer conflict religious exclusivists should at least recognize the considerable epistemic value in assessing their beliefs.'⁵⁴ The "best" (most reliable) rock-bottom beliefs are those the exclusivist finds herself holding after such beliefs have been subjected to belief assessment'.⁵⁵

Exclusivists' religious behaviour should change

John Hick believes that it would not be reasonable for the exclusivist to try to convert others. 'Each believer should, generally speaking, live within her or his inherited faith, participating as deeply as possible in its salvific path, but at the same time respecting the right of people within other traditions to do likewise.'⁵⁶

Keith Ward suggests that religious life should become less about dogma and that diversity should bring about ‘a firm stress on the primacy of moral and spiritual practice in religion’.⁵⁷

The blanket statements rejected

Introduction

While the above statements provide insight into the epistemic effects of religious diversity, each ignores the variety of cognitive agents and their circumstances. Since there are many factors that influence whether or not such effects apply to a particular believer and/or the epistemic status of her beliefs, these unqualified claims are all false. Each of the authors (except one)⁵⁸ who argues that religious diversity has some kind of negative epistemic impact on exclusivists or on the epistemic status of their exclusive beliefs gives some version of the argument presented at the beginning of the paper – that it is arbitrary to think that one’s exclusive religious beliefs are true, or are reliably formed, without some sort of good independent, non-question-begging argument for this claim.⁵⁹ Sometimes this style of argument depends on the confusion between being able to justify a belief to others (which is *not* necessary for justification or warrant) and a belief’s being justified or warranted. The weakness of all forms of this argument is that they ignore the variety of cognitive agents and their circumstances.

Epistemic status and being troubled

Alston writes that the rational thing for an exclusivist to do when faced with diversity is to maintain her beliefs, and Clark holds that exclusive beliefs remain warranted in the face of diversity. These claims, while true in some cases, are false in others. Some hold exclusive beliefs because they are naïve, stubborn, dishonest, lazy, irresponsible, etc. They have wrongheaded epistemic attitudes, little religious genius, scant religious experience, poor argumentative support, no resources for dealing with significant evidential challenges, no explanation for diversity, a small degree of conviction, etc. When such *epistemically impoverished* believers are confronted with religious diversity, their beliefs *will* be defeated. Of course, defeat does not require that all of these negative factors apply. Determining exactly which ones suffice for defeat is a project for another day, but suffice it to say that the more negative factors apply, the less likely it is that one’s exclusive belief will escape defeat.

For similar reasons, claims that the epistemic status of exclusive beliefs is *defeated* or *lessened* by the facts of diversity, or that believers should be troubled by religious diversity are also inadequate. Some exclusivists are *epistemically well-off*, i.e. they have had powerful transformative experiences, are religious geniuses, have significant self-support in their belief systems, have plausible arguments, a good explanation for religious diversity, etc. The impact of diversity

on the epistemic status of their beliefs may be minimal or non-existent, and these believers may be justifiably unperturbed by diversity.

Attempting to believe tentatively or to stop believing

While decisive assent is inappropriate for many exclusivists, it cannot be claimed that it is inappropriate for *all*, given the variety of believers and their circumstances. McKim writes, 'to the extent that we have reason to believe *p* to be false, our belief that *p* ought to be tentative'.⁶⁰ But a number of factors may effectively counterbalance reasons against an exclusivist perspective, including a believer's 'religious genius'. Linda Zagzebski suggests that in some cases:

[...] a person's reasons for believing in God would be analogous to the reasons why a wise person makes a moral judgment. There may be no set of propositions that explain or justify such a judgment ... The ultimate justification for beliefs is simply that they are the beliefs a person with *phronesis* would have in the circumstances.⁶¹

We cannot judge for certain whether a given person has religious *phronesis*, and so we cannot claim that religious diversity should cause her to believe tentatively. If there might be believers with remarkable ways of knowing, we cannot codify general rules about when one should believe tentatively.

Likewise, other factors may affect whether one can justifiably give exclusive propositions decisive assent. An epistemically virtuous religious genius who has had a number of transformative religious experiences, whose personality is well-fitted for attaining religious truth, whose socially established religious doxastic practice enjoys great self-support, who has supporting arguments for his belief, reasonable responses to criticisms, a plausible explanation for religious diversity, and deep affective and cognitive conviction, could be justified and warranted in holding his belief without tentativeness. Such epistemically well-off exclusivists may be rare, but it is important not to ignore those on the margins with our principles.

The modified claims that believers should at least *strive* towards tentativeness or towards non-belief are also inadequate. These attempts might involve reading other holy books or less of one's own, choosing new friends, reading David Hume, etc. Such actions may be epistemically appropriate or obligatory for many exclusivists, but not for all. A believer might justifiably think that committing herself fully to her faith is the best way for her to gain significant religious truth, especially if she is epistemically well-off. She may rightly reject the wisdom of striving for tentativeness or non-belief. As William James puts it:

Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, 'Do not decide, but leave the question open', is itself a passional decision – just like deciding yes or no – and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.⁶²

One might object that there are epistemically well-off exclusivists adhering to different religions. Doesn't this necessitate a tentative response from each? Certainly not. First, there is no way for one to know for sure whether others have comparable experiences or faculties of insight, etc. These qualities are often internally clear, but externally opaque. Further, there is the 'bandwagon effect', where people conform descriptions of their experiences to accounts reported by others, so many may report being epistemically well-off when they aren't. Even when it seems clear that others with opposing beliefs *are* epistemically well-off, the exclusivist may still be rightly convinced that this does not impugn the reality of her perceptions. She may be firmly convinced that her views are deeply coherent and that her religious perspective offers the best explanation for the existence of these other epistemically well-off believers. Further, she may trust this God who is revealing truth to her and transforming her in powerful ways. In the end, it may rightly seem to her that no other epistemic option available to her is epistemically superior to proceeding with her own religious doxastic practice.

Now perhaps the pluralist would agree that an epistemically well-off exclusivist could be justified in holding firmly to her own set of beliefs when made aware of the existence of epistemically well-off exclusivists from other traditions. However, the pluralist might hold that when made aware of *religious pluralism*, even an epistemically well-off exclusivist should attempt to put aside her exclusivist beliefs in favour of pluralist ones. Pluralism, one might argue, provides by far the most satisfactory explanation of the apparent existence of epistemically well-off believers and real transformation in every major religious tradition. But the superiority of a pluralistic explanation of religious diversity cannot be demonstrated on non-question-begging grounds, and we cannot expect the epistemically well-off exclusivist to be convinced by it. The suitability of an explanation can only be judged against the background of one's other beliefs and experiences. Certainly the pluralistic explanation will seem most plausible to the pluralist, but it will not be most convincing to the epistemically well-off exclusivist, given her own experiences, epistemic virtue, genius, etc. Religious doxastic exclusivisms (especially those which countenance experiential and soteriological inclusivism) can offer their own plausible explanations of the facts of religious diversity, and such explanations are not clearly inferior to the pluralist one, especially when judged against the unique totality of evidence available to each epistemically well-off exclusivist.

Belief reassessment, peer conflict resolution, and religious practices

While belief reassessment and epistemic peer conflict resolution are epistemically valuable and even obligatory for many exclusivists, why think that they are so for *all*? Even if for many the most reliably held rock-bottom beliefs are those that have been assessed in light of diversity, might not some people more

reliably proceed by ignoring such assessment, and justifiably expect this to be the case? In some instances, belief reassessment and epistemic conflict resolution might exact an epistemic opportunity cost that makes such courses of action not only *pragmatically* disadvantageous but *epistemically* undesirable. A believer may realize that her most significant insights into God and her relationship with God come when immersed in prayer, in worship, in religious community, in evangelism, in serving the poor, etc. These aspects of religious life engender a way of seeing that is disrupted and obfuscated when she shifts into critical re-evaluation. This might be because she is an intuitive sort of religious genius and much less skilled at critical reflection. Because of the opportunity cost associated with reassessment, if she is interested in maximizing truth, she may well decide to forgo such a course of action. In this case, confirmation of her beliefs might be implicit and come about as she is immersed in the stream of religious experience that commitment brings.

It may be that many, perhaps most people should reassess their religious beliefs critically and objectively, but for some epistemically well-off believers it will justifiably seem that the search for truth is best executed by devoting energies to God in a particular way that leaves little time or energy for the kind of reassessment and epistemic conflict resolution that Alston, Hasker, McKim, Steinkraus, and Basinger recommend.

William James insists that it may be essential for him 'to run the risk of acting as if my passionate need of taking the world religiously might be prophetic and right'.⁶³ A number of holy books call adherents to committed faith, reinforcing the notion that the believer's religious convictions are indeed prophetic and right. Terence Penelhum, who is drawn to a tentative Christian belief, struggles with this aspect of Christianity:

I must recognize, however, that in thus seeming to make a virtue out of hesitancy and ambivalence, I seem indeed to run counter to the Scriptures. The faith that is said by Jesus, again and again, to be the source of healing and to characterize the citizens of the kingdom is a faith that seems to leave no room for doubt, hesitancy, or ambiguity.⁶⁴

One might reject the idea that faith and reassessment are mutually exclusive, but might not a particular epistemically well-off exclusivist justifiably take this position, and find what she takes to be God's categorical call to action and subjective devotion not only more pragmatically exigent, but also more epistemically compelling than the philosophers' call to engage in reassessment and epistemic conflict resolution?

Finally, similar arguments can be made that not all exclusivists are obliged to change their religious practices when confronted with diversity. Some epistemically well-off exclusivists may indeed be justified in thinking that they need to invite others to faith, or that matters of dogma are central to the religious life.

Conclusion

If it is not advisable to make pithy statements about the effects of diversity on all exclusivistic beliefs and believers, what then *can* be said about these effects? First, religious diversity will and should have a profound impact on many exclusivists and the epistemic status of their beliefs. Many exclusivists are epistemically impoverished, and thus the epistemic status of their exclusive beliefs may well be lessened or defeated by religious diversity. Many exclusivists *should* find diversity troubling, and many *should* try to hold their beliefs tentatively, or to give them up altogether. Many will be obliged to reassess their beliefs and to attempt epistemic peer conflict resolution, and some should cease proselytizing and/or change some of the ways in which they conceive of and practise their religion.

Can we conclude that all exclusivists should at least analyse their situations to see whether they are epistemically well-off in the sense I've described – to see whether they fall into the category of those who need not hold their beliefs tentatively, attempt epistemic conflict resolution, etc? Again, no. Many, perhaps most, exclusivists should take this step. Others will have a suitable implicit sense of their epistemic wealth as they form their exclusive beliefs and live in accordance with them. Pure externalists might even hold that it is enough for the warrant of the exclusivist's beliefs that the exclusivist merely be epistemically well-off.

Ultimately, the effects of religious diversity are on individuals and their particular beliefs, and have to be assessed case by case. It would be helpful to move towards a more precise calculus for determining to what extent the facts of diversity impact exclusive religious beliefs when various factors are present to various degrees. For instance, if we agree with Basinger that some kind of epistemic peer-conflict resolution attempt is often called for, can we get a bit more clear on exactly what kind of action is appropriate when *this* kind of person, with *this* kind of personality, with *this* kind of epistemic virtue, with *these* particular skills and experiences, with *this* kind of explanation for diversity, whose religious worldview has *this* degree of self-support, etc., encounters the facts of diversity in *this* way and to *this* extent? Should she drop out of school and travel to India? Should she merely read Huston Smith's *The World's Religions*? Should she just write out her testimony? This kind of work would be immensely interesting and difficult. In the end, we may be left not with precise principles but instead with suggestions on how to develop religious epistemic *phronesis*. However that might be, it is clear that attempts to make general claims about the epistemic effects of diversity that apply to all exclusivists and all exclusive beliefs fail because of the diversity of cognitive agents and the circumstances in which they believe.⁶⁵

Notes

1. David Basinger points out that there is 'intra-theistic' religious diversity as well as the 'inter-theistic' diversity that exists among religions, and he explores the relevance of this distinction in *Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Assessment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 2–3. See also Terence Tilley 'Religious pluralism as a problem for "practical" religious epistemology', *Religious Studies*, 30 (1994), 161–169.
2. For debate on the epistemic relevance of this correlation see John Hick 'The epistemological challenge of religious pluralism', *Faith and Philosophy*, 14 (1997), 277–286; Alvin Plantinga 'Pluralism: a defense of religious exclusivism', in T. Senor (ed.) *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 191–215; Peter van Inwagen 'Non est Hick', in Senor *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, 216–241.
3. See John Hick 'Religious pluralism and salvation', *Faith and Philosophy*, 5 (1988), 365–377.
4. See Hick 'Epistemological challenge of religious pluralism'.
5. See Plantinga 'Pluralism: a defense of religious exclusivism'.
6. The views of the authors mentioned in this introductory section are cited later in the paper.
7. Alvin Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 457.
8. William Lad Sessions 'Plantinga's box', *Faith and Philosophy*, 8 (1991), 51.
9. Philip Quinn 'Epistemology in philosophy of religion', in Paul K. Moser (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 534.
10. In 'Religious diversity and the epistemic justification of religious belief', *Faith and Philosophy*, 10 (1993), 345, Jerome Gellman argues that 'religious belief is epistemically justified in the face of diversity'. In *idem* 'Epistemic peer conflict and religious belief', *Faith and Philosophy*, 15 (1998), 233, he writes that 'if one already has the truth, the attempt to find the truth would be superfluous ... [Religious epistemology] maintains right from the start that it has the truth. In that case, it need not attempt to resolve the peer conflict.'
11. *Idem* 'In defence of a contented religious exclusivism', *Religious Studies*, 36 (2000), 401.
12. Alvin Plantinga justifies this choice by tracing the use of the term 'justification' in modern and contemporary epistemology to deontological concerns that imply internalism. See his *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
13. C. Stephen Evans 'The epistemological significance of transformative religious experiences: a Kierkegaardian exploration', *Faith and Philosophy*, 8 (1991), 183.
14. *Ibid.*, 184.
15. Peter Tanous *Investment Gurus* (New York NY: New York Institute of Finance, 1997), 163.
16. This ability is probably not a faculty of a priori intuition, but a skill at complicated, implicit thought processes.
17. Winifred Gallagher *Spiritual Genius* (New York NY: Random House, 2002), 59–60.
18. A 'religious genius' might be thought of as one who has a marvellous way of *expressing* religious ideas. Here I am only referring to those who have a special genius for *forming* true religious beliefs.
19. Van Inwagen ('Non est Hick', 223) has remarked that his 'spiritual life is devoid of the least tincture of mystical or religious experience'.
20. I have taken this example from Quinn 'Epistemology in philosophy of religion', 535.
21. See ch. 4 of William Alston's *Perceiving God* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
22. Quinn 'Epistemology in philosophy of religion', 534.
23. See Gellman 'In defence of a contented religious exclusivism', 414.
24. In 'Perils of pluralism', *Faith and Philosophy*, 14 (1997), 303–320, Kelly James Clark argues in favour of non-pluralist accounts of diversity that allow believers justifiably to maintain their exclusive beliefs. See also Andrew Koehl 'Reformed epistemology and diversity', *Faith and Philosophy*, 18 (2001), 168–191.
25. John Hick *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 141.
26. Basinger recognizes the importance of genius and argumentative strength; Basinger *Religious Diversity*, 12. Alston defines the problem of diversity in terms of believers who engage in different doxastic practices that enjoy the same amount of self-support in 'Religious diversity and perceptual knowledge of God', *Faith and Philosophy*, 5 (1988), 438–439. Philip Quinn mentions the relevance of argumentative strength and one's religious experiences (Quinn 'Epistemology in philosophy of religion', 535). Robert McKim discusses intellectual integrity in 'Religious belief and religious diversity', *Irish Philosophical*

- Journal*, 6 (1989), 282 ff., and David Silver acknowledges the relevance of argumentative strength in 'Religious experience and the facts of pluralism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 49 (2001), 14 ff. In Jerome Gellman's most recent article, 'In defence of a contented religious exclusivism', he emphasizes the ways in which religious experience, self-support, epistemic virtue, and having an explanation for diversity affect the impact of diversity.
27. Alston *Perceiving God*, 274.
 28. Clark 'Perils of pluralism', 317.
 29. Alston 'Religious diversity and perceptual knowledge of God', 446.
 30. J. L. Schellenberg 'Religious experience and religious diversity: a reply to Alston', *Religious Studies*, 30 (1994), 159.
 31. Silver 'Religious experience and the facts of pluralism', 1.
 32. Gary Gutting *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 90.
 33. *Ibid.* 179.
 34. Joseph Runzo 'God, commitment, and other faiths: pluralism vs relativism', *Faith and Philosophy*, 5 (1988), 357.
 35. John Hick *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 235.
 36. J. L. Mackie *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 182.
 37. Alston 'Religious diversity and perceptual knowledge of God', 446.
 38. McKim 'Religious belief and religious diversity', 296.
 39. Runzo 'God, commitment, and other faiths', 343.
 40. *Idem World Views and Perceiving God* (New York NY: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 236.
 41. McKim 'Religious belief and religious diversity', 297.
 42. Terence Penelhum 'A belated return', in Kelly James Clark (ed.) *Philosophers Who Believe* (Grand Rapids MI: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 234.
 43. Gutting *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 108.
 44. *Ibid.*
 45. Silver 'Religious experience and the facts of pluralism', 11.
 46. Julian Willard 'Alston's epistemology of religious belief and the problem of religious diversity', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 68.
 47. *Ibid.*, 69.
 48. Alston 'Religious diversity and perceptual knowledge of God', 446.
 49. Warren Steinkraus *Taking Religious Claims Seriously: A Philosophy of Religion* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 11.
 50. William Hasker 'The foundations of theism: scoring the Quinn–Plantinga debate', *Faith and Philosophy*, 15 (1998), 63.
 51. McKim 'Religious belief and religious diversity', 279.
 52. *Ibid.*, 296.
 53. Basinger *Religious Diversity*, 12.
 54. *Ibid.*, 19.
 55. *Ibid.*, 21.
 56. John Hick 'A concluding comment', *Faith and Philosophy*, 5 (1988), 455.
 57. Keith Ward 'Truth and the diversity of religions', *Religious Studies*, 26 (1990), 18.
 58. Joseph Runzo's argument ('God, commitment, and other faiths', 348) derives from the idea that all religious beliefs are human constructs, and thus are subject to the limitations of human perspective and the fallibility of human reason. I would say that his argument concerning the effects of diversity falters on a failure to acknowledge the possibility of epistemically well-off exclusivists whose religious beliefs, while still being human constructs, are arrived at through a divinely ordained and safeguarded manner.
 59. A few of the philosophers – Hasker ('Foundations of theism'), and Penelhum ('Belated return') – don't provide an argument for their statements because their articles do not primarily concern religious diversity. Penelhum's reasoning as expressed elsewhere does seem to be a variety of the arbitrariness argument; 'Response to Chappell', *Religious Studies*, 33 (1997), 115–119. J. L. Mackie's position in *The Miracle of Theism* is also dependent on an argument that experience cannot be a support for particular religious claims.

60. McKim 'Religious belief and religious diversity', 281.
61. Linda Zagzebski 'Vocatio philosophiae', in Clark *Philosophers Who Believe*, 252.
62. William James *The Will to Believe* (New York NY: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1927), 11.
63. *Ibid.* 27.
64. Penelhum 'Belated return', 234.
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