



## THE METAPHYSICS OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY: FROM HOMOGENIZING THEOLOGICAL AGENDAS TO CONCEPTUAL JUSTICE

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**ABSTRACT:** An increasing number of voices have been calling for philosophy of religion to expand beyond a preoccupation with the “rationality of theism.” Religious pluralist theories of religious diversity might be expected to exemplify a broader scope; in practice, however, such theories are often hampered by theological agendas that prioritize convergence over attention to differences. Focusing on approaches to the metaphysics of religious diversity, this article distinguishes between (a) approaches that prioritize the discovery of the fundamental truth behind specific forms of metaphysical belief and (b) approaches that foreground the variety of metaphysical beliefs held by diverse religious communities. Although these approaches need not be incompatible, the former is apt to emphasize homogeneity whereas the latter encourages awareness of nuance and variegation. Taking diversity among Hindu conceptions of the divine as a case in point, the article seeks to make conceptual space for a philosophy of religious diversity that is radically pluralist and critically descriptive.

**KEYWORDS:** John Hick, Hinduism, metaphysics, religious diversity, religious pluralism, ultimate reality

### Introduction

Issues of methodology have become salient in contemporary philosophy of religion.<sup>1</sup> A growing number of books and articles have questioned whether philosophy of religion as it has standardly been pursued comes anywhere near to doing conceptual justice not only to the diversity of religious traditions but also to the diverse types of

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of an earlier version of this article, I am grateful to delegates at the 22<sup>nd</sup> European Society for Philosophy of Religion Conference, Prague, August 2018, and especially to my co-panellist Christian Polke. Referees for this journal also offered encouraging and constructive comments. Some ideas from this article are further developed in Burley (2020a, Ch. 1, and 2020b).

activity that fall within the category of religion.<sup>2</sup> Several critics have noted that the preoccupation with the “rationality of theism” – that is, the concern with questions of whether the properties classically attributed to God are internally and mutually coherent and whether there are sound reasons for believing that the God conceived of in those terms exists – distorts the philosophical enterprise in two significant ways. First, it operates with a conception of God that is, as Timothy Knepper has put it, “ahistorically rarified” (Knepper, 2013, p. 9). In other words, in their haste to develop universally applicable theories, philosophers have downplayed the need for attention to the particularities of historically and geographically distinct conceptions of God, thereby ending up with an abstract “God of the philosophers” that bears little resemblance to any god of lived religion. A second distorting effect is that what purports to be the philosophy of *religion* all too frequently reduces itself to the philosophy of one specific and highly abstract form of *theism*, resulting in an impoverished conception of religion’s rich and multifarious manifestations and dimensions. As Kevin Schilbrack analyses the situation, philosophy of religion has suffered from “narrowness, intellectualism, and insularity” (Schilbrack, 2014, p. xii): narrowness in the sense that it has fixated on a tiny subset of the world’s religious traditions, intellectualism in the sense that it has privileged intellectual or doctrinal or belief-focused elements of religion to the exclusion of more practice-oriented elements, and insularity in the sense that it has done little to engage with either other branches of philosophy or other disciplines involved in the study of religion.

Of all the areas of philosophy of religion, one might expect the philosophy of religious diversity to be the least likely to suffer from these limitations of scope, given that its *raison d’être* is to examine the multiplicity of religious traditions in the contemporary world and the complex relations between them. Furthermore, from among the various theories that have emerged within this area of inquiry, one might expect those that go by the name of *religious pluralism* to be the most attentive to a wide array of religions, for any claim about the plurality of religions should be grounded in exposition and analysis of, precisely, a plurality. To some extent, these expectations have been borne out, but only partially. When we look to actual theories of religious pluralism, what we often find are attempts either to minimize the differences between diverse religions so as to represent them as mutually compatible variations on a common theme, or to acknowledge the genuine differences while nevertheless emphasizing the desirability of a gradual movement towards greater convergence and synthesis. Such convergence is viewed as desirable because it is assumed to increase the likelihood of interreligious harmony.

It should go without saying that there is nothing wrong with the desire to enhance interreligious harmony. A problem arises, however, when this desire takes precedence over the aspiration to do conceptual justice to the religions themselves – that is, to expound them in a rigorous manner. Under such circumstances, the task of deepening

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<sup>2</sup> Recent edited volumes reflecting the range of critical appraisals include Draper and Schellenberg (2017) and Kanaris (2018).

our understanding of the religions in all their messy complexity tends to be subordinated to the ideal of promoting an irenic picture. A particular theological agenda overrides the philosophical project of developing a fine-grained hermeneutics of religious diversity. This, at any rate, is what I wish to argue in this article, with specific reference to the theme of the *metaphysics* of religious diversity.

One way of beginning the argument is to distinguish between two forms that an inquiry into the metaphysics of religious diversity could take. On the one hand, it could take the form of an investigation of the respective metaphysical beliefs of diverse religious communities, and perhaps also of the various practices, rituals, narratives, ethical commitments and so on that go along with, or are internally related to, those metaphysical beliefs. Let us call this an *inquiry into diverse religious metaphysics*. On the other hand, it could take the form of an inquiry that seeks to go beyond the particular beliefs (or practices, etc.) of specific religious communities and to instead discover the truth behind them all – to disclose a supreme or ultimate reality that underlies all their particular conceptions. Let us call this an *inquiry into ultimate reality*. What I am here calling inquiries into diverse religious metaphysics make possible an appreciation not only of the particularities of distinct systems of religious belief and practice but also of the resemblances between those systems. Meanwhile, inquiries into ultimate reality are very different. Their relationship to the religions themselves is not altogether clear. The extent to which such an inquiry gives careful attention to the particularities of, and the resemblances and dissimilarities between, diverse religions will depend upon how the inquiry is pursued.

In light of this distinction between two broad types of inquiry, my argument will proceed along two main lines. First, I argue that when we look to see how inquiries into ultimate reality have, in fact, been pursued by proponents of religious pluralism, what is revealed, at least in several important cases, is a strong tendency *not* to give careful attention to the particularities of different systems of religious belief and practice. Instead, as I suggested above, there is a common tendency to minimize particularities and divergences, subordinating them to an overarching vision of unity. In these cases, analytic precision is suppressed by metaphysical theorizing. The result is that we – both the speculative metaphysicians themselves and their readers – end up with a theory of ultimate reality that impoverishes our understanding of the details of the religions to which the theory is supposed to be relevant. The theory distorts rather than illuminates the religions. I shall be concentrating specifically on theories of religious pluralism because, on the face of it, it is these that promise to do conceptual justice to religious diversity. The irony is that they claim to be doing justice to diversity while in fact painting a homogenizing picture that blends a rich and colourful mixture into a dreary smudge.

The second component of my argument is to commend the practice of inquiring into the diversity of religious metaphysics. By this, as I noted above, I mean inquiry into the respective metaphysical beliefs of diverse religious communities. This is a valuable task if one's aim is to gain a deeper understanding of distinct religions and hence also

of the variety inherent within the overall category of religion. This task need not be incompatible with inquiring into ultimate reality, but it is important to recognize how it differs from that other task. It differs significantly in orientation, for its emphasis is on cultivating a certain mode of attention that is alert to nuance and variegation. Inquiries into ultimate reality, by contrast, tend to promote generalizations and speculations that float free of careful attention to particulars. To avoid examining the issue in abstraction from concrete examples, when I come to discuss inquiries into diverse religious metaphysics, I shall take the diversity among Hindu conceptions of the divine as a case in point. First, however, I critically discuss the enterprise of inquiring into ultimate reality.

### **Inquiries Into Ultimate Reality**

It has been widely recognized that theories styling themselves as versions of religious pluralism come in many guises. As Gavin D'Costa has pointedly observed, "'pluralism' is Hydra-like in its growth" (D'Costa, 2016, p. 137): if one version dies, two or more are apt to spring up in its place. It is for this reason that some commentators have recommended speaking of *pluralisms* (in the plural), and contrasting these with the various exclusivisms and inclusivisms, rather than implying that exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism are merely three monolithic options (Hedges & Race, 2008; Harris, Hedges & Hettiarachchi, 2016, p. 1). D'Costa has also argued that theories of religious pluralism ought really to be renamed as theories of "post-Christian inclusivism": "post-Christian" because they typically emerge from a Christian milieu while officially disavowing exclusively Christian doctrines, and "inclusivism" because they propound what they take to be the one true theory of the nature of reality while condescendingly declaring that adherents of specific religions have gained merely a partial grasp of that reality. I share these concerns of D'Costa's, and though I do not wish to insist that any renaming should take place, I readily acknowledge the irony in the fact that positions purporting to affirm religious pluralism have so often attempted to supersede the plurality with a homogenizing theory.

Sharpening the focus of my discussion will require selectivity about the versions of religious pluralism that I consider. Although John Hick's version has already been discussed extensively in the literature, this is for good reason, since it remains, as Victoria Harrison has remarked, "the most well-known and influential pluralist theory" (Harrison, 2015, p. 260). It will, therefore, also be one of my chief examples. However, I shall integrate into my discussion reference to work by other proponents of pluralism, most notably Perry Schmidt-Leukel, John Cobb, and Peter Byrne, thereby indicating the broader significance of my treatment of the topic. Harrison herself has developed a rather different theory, which she calls *internalist pluralism* (e.g. Harrison,

2012). Limits of space prevent me from discussing that theory here, though I have engaged critically with it elsewhere (Burley, 2019; 2020a, Ch. 1).

Hick was undoubtedly a pioneer inasmuch as he, along with a handful of other early innovators such as Ninian Smart, exemplified ways in which philosophy of religion might take seriously ideas from non-Abrahamic religions, especially Hindu and Buddhist traditions. When it comes to his “pluralistic hypothesis,” however, Hick’s treatment of religions becomes homogenizing, reductionist and moralistic. As is well known, the hypothesis proposes, first, “that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human,” and second, “that within each of [these ‘great world faiths’] the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place” (Hick, 2004, p. 240). Despite being posed as a hypothesis, the hypothesized view is evidently one that Hick espoused. The implications for an appreciation of genuine religious diversity are, however, disastrous. Here my critical remarks will revolve around three main points: first, the homogenizing implications of privileging the “great world faiths” and disregarding other traditions; second, the hermeneutical deficiencies that result from treating religious doctrine in purely functional or instrumental terms; and third, the distorted picture of religious possibilities that results from the application of an ethical criterion for demarcating “authentic” from “inauthentic” religions.

### *Privileging the “Great” Religions*

An initial problem is the uncritical use of value-laden terms such as “great world faiths” and “great world traditions.” While some might contend that “great” is being used here merely in the sense of “large,” such a contention is hardly sustainable when we examine the overall theory that emerges from the sort of hypothesis that Hick puts forward. Hick himself subscribes to the theory of an “axial age,” which Karl Jaspers advanced in relation to cultures or civilizations (Jaspers, 1953). Applying the theory specifically to religions as opposed to whole cultures, Hick distinguishes between “pre-” and “post-axial” religions. While the former strive merely “to keep life going on an even keel,” the latter, which Hick supposes to have originated over the course of the first millennium BCE, “are centrally concerned with a radical betterment or transformation of the human situation” (Hick, 2005, p. 135). This betterment is identified by Hick as “salvation/liberation/enlightenment/fulfilment” (1984, p. 156), which he subsequently whittled down to the more succinct (but also, for that very reason, narrower) “salvation/liberation” (2004, esp. Ch. 3).

In the category of post-axial religions, Hick explicitly includes Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism, and curiously, under the heading of Hinduism, he occasionally includes Jainism and Sikhism as well (Hick, 2005, p. 135). The “pre-axial” category, meanwhile, includes ancient and extinct small-scale religions

plus those extant religions that would these days be referred to as indigenous religions or indigenous traditions. While anthropologists of religion have worked hard to bring out the complexities within and the diversity among indigenous religions, Hick's model lumps them all together in the same "pre-axial" or "primal" or "archaic" bag, thence to be disregarded as of little philosophical interest.

The pervasive privileging of a select group of religions as "great" or "major" has come under attack within the academic field of religious studies from critics of the "World Religions Paradigm." Such critics complain that the paradigm implicitly treats Protestant Christianity as typifying what a religion is and "constructs" a conception of each of the "Big Five" on that basis (Cotter & Robertson, 2016). The "Big Five" normally comprise Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism - "almost always," Cotter and Robertson add, "presented in that Abrahamocentric order" (Cotter & Robertson, 2016, p. 2). Whatever we might think of those particular complaints, philosophers and theologians are prone to appear naïve when they carry on as though the onslaught against the World Religions Paradigm had never happened. In an effort to be more encompassing, further religions are sporadically tagged on to the Big Five. As we have seen, Hick sometimes adds Daoism and smuggles in Jainism and Sikhism under the umbrella of Hinduism - a move that would probably be unwelcome to many, especially to many Sikhs (e.g. Singh Nabha, 2006 [1898]).

Perry Schmidt-Leukel, for his part, adds "Chinese religions," which itself is an eclectic category, and then proceeds to speak of "the six religious traditions" (Schmidt-Leukel, 2017, p. 109). In fact, Schmidt-Leukel is evidently aware of the complicated history of interreligious disputes and confluences in China. Moreover, his treatment of each of the other five traditions in his schema goes further than does Hick in bringing out the internal complexity of each of them. Yet ultimately Schmidt-Leukel's project is concerned with encouraging each tradition to move in the direction of theological integration and synthesis. The aim of doing conceptual justice to the radical diversity that exists within and across all religious traditions is, at most, a secondary consideration. As with Hick, this theological agenda blurs an important methodological distinction between striving to understand religious diversity, on the one hand, and trying to promote interreligious harmony, on the other. The latter aspiration is liable to slant the inquiry in a direction that accentuates affinities and minimizes incompatibilities. These factors - namely, the privileging of "great world religions" and of the desire to nurture synergies between them - militate against nuance and in favour of a homogenized picture of religions.

#### *Doctrinal Functionalism*

Hick's handling of the topic of religious doctrine may be objected to on the grounds that it reduces metaphysical contentions to something purely functional, where the

function is understood in narrow ethical terms. Hick's reason for interpreting doctrine in functional (or instrumental or pragmatic) terms is that he needed to find some means of accounting for the evident doctrinal divergences between different religions. If all "great" religions are equivalent insofar as they are directed towards the Real, why, we might ask, do they profess discrepant teachings? Hick's solution is to claim that the discrepancies are merely at the level of myth: the religions communicate their teachings through diverse mythologies, but the mythologies are all "true" in a functional sense inasmuch as they advance the transformation of practitioners' lives from self-centredness to Reality-centredness (Hick, 2004, p. 375).

Among the problems with this kind of functional analysis are that, first, it misrepresents the believers' relationship to the doctrines they espouse, and second, it oversimplifies the multiple roles of doctrine in believers' lives by compressing them into a single "mythic" mould. The analysis misrepresents the believers' relationship to doctrines because it sidesteps the issue of whether those believers hold the doctrines to be true in some sense other than a purely functional or pragmatic one. When, for example, a Christian recites the Apostles' Creed, many questions could be raised about whether, or to what extent, she holds the Creed to be true. For some practitioners, reciting the Creed may be merely formal and habitual, serving a social or ritual function but having only a superficial meaning in the person's life. In the case of someone whose faith is strong, the situation may be very different. It would get things the wrong way round to say that she believes the Creed to be true because she believes it will help to steer her moral life away from self-centredness and towards something greater. Rather, what she believes is that her life will be steered in that direction precisely *because* the Creed is true: the Creed "speaks to her," it nourishes her life. Indeed, it is from the Creed and from the Christian teachings more generally that the believer receives her understanding of what a selfless ethical life consists in; she does not first arrive at a conception of what "Reality-centredness" would be like and then, on the basis of that conception, appraise Christian doctrines to be true. A theory that characterizes doctrinal belief in terms of believing a myth that serves a pragmatic function is likely to direct our attention away from, rather than towards, the real reasons for a deep faith of this kind.

The functional analysis of doctrine in terms of myth oversimplifies the multiple roles of doctrinal belief not only because doctrines can play a richer variety of roles than such an analysis implies (including liturgical and prayerful roles, roles of community cohesion and definition, and so on), but also because the analysis oversimplifies the purposes that mythology itself can fulfil. For example, the epic tales of Rāma and Sītā in Indian mythology may be invoked to, among other things, provide part of the narrative backdrop to the annual Diwali festival, epitomize a vision of the victory of righteousness over evil, depict an ideal of uxorial loyalty, and support Hindu nationalist claims that India is a Hindu nation. But our understanding of such mythic resources is hampered rather than enhanced by collapsing all forms of doctrine

into a single category and by reducing the functions of that category to the expediting of ethical transformation.

We might suppose that other religious pluralists improve upon Hick's view insofar as they recognize different features or aspects of the metaphysical reality towards which the "great" religions are directed. John Cobb, for example, draws a threefold distinction between "theistic, cosmic, and acosmic" religions (Cobb, 1993, p. 78), proposing that the respective metaphysical doctrines are based on distinct modes of religious experience through which these different aspects of divine reality are encountered. While ostensibly less homogenizing than Hick's model, the schema of three types of metaphysical doctrine is at best a starting point for a more refined analysis of the specificities of particular religions. It risks obstructing that analysis if distinct forms of religion are forced into the same category without further qualification. With regard to the category of acosmic conceptions of reality, for example, Cobb treats this as encompassing such contextually heterogeneous notions as Paul Tillich's sense of God as "being-itself," Advaita Vedānta's "Brahman without attributes," the ultimate "emptiness" of all things propounded by Mahāyāna Buddhism, and the "creativity" proposed by Alfred North Whitehead (Cobb, 1993, p. 80, 82; Griffin, 2005, p. 49). Considered at a high level of abstraction, there are, no doubt, affinities between these doctrines, but to avoid the danger of the label "acosmic" obscuring more than it illuminates, one would also need to give close attention to the contexts in which the doctrines are articulated.

In some cases, one would need to examine places where advocates of one of these doctrines have tried vigorously to differentiate it from another, such as in disagreements between Advaita Vedāntins and Mahāyāna Buddhists (see, e.g., Whaling, 1979). Upon examining these debates, one sees that they hinge as much upon sectarian rivalries and adherence to specific doctrinal lineages as they do upon technical philosophical exposition of the concepts of Brahman and emptiness. It is, among other things, these broader parameters of the disputes that may be lost sight of when traditions such as Advaita Vedānta and Mahāyāna Buddhism are placed in the same "acosmic" category. Metaphysical disagreements are often inextricably bound up with complex sociocultural factors.

Going beyond Cobb's three-aspect view, other religious pluralists have proposed a multiplicity of aspects. The "multiaspectual" view maintains that the ultimate reality, though in itself singular, may "manifest" in as many ways as there are different conceptions – or, at any rate, different theologically and morally *respectable* conceptions – of that reality, with each of these manifestations constituting a distinct aspect of the divine (Byrne, 2011, p. 38). While purportedly avoiding the reductive functionalism of Hick's hypothesis, the use of terms such as "aspect" and "manifest" do not take us very far towards an understanding of what the relationship is supposed to be between the multiple conceptions of the ultimate reality in question. In what sense, we might wonder, could the Trinity of Christianity be an aspect of a reality that has among its other aspects unitarian deities such as Allāh of Islam and YHVH of Judaism, let alone,



for example, the impersonal monistic Brahman of Advaita Vedānta and the absolute emptiness of Mahāyāna Buddhism? Whether or not we can make sense of this multiaspectual theory, the theory shares with Hick's hypothesis the speculative (and condescending) contention that all religious believers, without exception, are, in a sense, deluded about ultimate reality, for they misguidedly conceptualize that reality in terms other than those expounded by the pluralist theory itself.

### *Moralistic Evaluations*

Hick is among the philosophers of religion who, when considering whether religion can be defined, are favourable to a "family resemblance" account, according to which the correct application of the concept of religion does not depend on there being any single property or set of properties that everything we call religions have in common; it is enough that they exhibit "a network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing like the resemblances and differences [...] among the members of a natural family" (Hick, 2004, p. 4).<sup>3</sup> In the light of such a pliable account, Hick is able to admit that traditions as diverse as Christianity, Theravāda Buddhism and the ancient worship of Moloch (which allegedly involved human sacrifice) are all religions (2004, p. 5). When it comes to distinguishing between "authentic" and "inauthentic" religions, however, Hick's family resemblance principle goes out the window, to be replaced by the essentializing and narrowly prescriptive "ethical criterion" that Hick claims to find in the scriptures of all "great" traditions.

Hick's procedure for arriving at his ethical criterion is to inspect scriptural sources associated with the religions in which he is interested, and to select passages expressive of what he identifies as the Golden Rule – roughly, the principle that one ought to treat others as one would wish to be treated oneself. When expounding the modes of action and forms of life enjoined by the traditions in question, it is as though Hick has already decided in advance what is to count as properly ethical, and it is this *a priori* decision that determines which passages are to be treated as normative for each tradition as a whole – and indeed for the traditions considered collectively. Thus, for example, with reference to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Hick quotes a "description of the good person" in which characteristics such as generosity, honesty, gentleness, compassion, humility and forbearance are praised (Hick, 2004, p. 317, citing *Bhagavad Gītā* 16.1–3). What Hick does not pause to mention is the overall context of the quoted passage, located within a dialogue between the warrior-prince Arjuna and the divine incarnation, Lord Kṛṣṇa, in which Kṛṣṇa is ostensibly seeking to persuade Arjuna that the right course of action is that of fulfilling his military duty and entering resolutely into an internecine battle that, as Arjuna recognizes, threatens to tear the society apart. The deep ethical ambivalence and complexity of the text, and the multiple

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<sup>3</sup> Hick is here explicitly paraphrasing Wittgenstein (1953, §66). See also Hick (1990, pp. 2–3) and Schmidt-Leukel (2017, p. 244).

interpretations and appropriations to which it is amenable, are set aside in Hick's eagerness to find fodder to support a general thesis about an ethical ideal supposedly shared by all the great religions.

Some religions are summarily precluded from Hick's inquiry on the grounds that their respective conceptions of the divine "are clearly morally defective" (2004, p. 339), while those religions that are deemed worthy of consideration are shoehorned into a constricted ethical framework. The result is a homogenized and sanitized caricature of diversity, with any incongruities demoted to the status of anomalies that require cleansing through doctrinal reform. In view of this consequence, we might follow D'Costa in characterizing the sort of pluralistic hypothesis proffered by Hick as being itself a kind of mythology (D'Costa, 1990, p. xi).<sup>4</sup>

### **Inquiring Into Diverse Religious Metaphysics**

In defence of the kinds of would-be pluralistic positions that I have criticized above, it might be claimed that there is nothing inherently wrong with the methods of selectivity and abstraction that they deploy. As Peter Byrne remarks, "Pluralism abstracts commonalities and overlaps in facets of religion for certain limited purposes. It need not at all deny that the reality is richer than the abstraction" (Byrne, 1995, p. 10). While it is certainly true that abstraction *need* not involve a denial of the richness and complexity, what I have been arguing is that, in practice, what we find in those pluralist theories that presume to identify the ultimate reality underlying religious metaphysical diversity is a distortion of the phenomena. It is not that commonalities and overlaps are placed alongside divergences in order to build up a balanced picture. Instead, examples of religiosity are deliberately cherry-picked for the purpose of bolstering a homogenizing model. If the deficiencies of understanding that such procedures foster are to be countered, what is needed, I propose, are inquiries into the diversity of metaphysics among religious forms of life.

I suggested above that Cobb's threefold distinction between "theistic," "cosmic" and "acosmic" religions might provide (at most) a starting point for further inquiry. Advancing the inquiry would require attending both to the diversity that populates each of these three categories and to the fraught interpretive debates that, in many cases, persist over how different conceptions of the divine are best to be articulated. The notion of theism, for instance, masks a panoply of metaphysical doctrines and forms of belief and behaviour. Even within what are commonly regarded as single religious traditions, theistic diversity frequently obtains. The tradition, or cluster of traditions, known as Hinduism is a case in point, and it is upon this that I shall focus in this section. If we look to the ancient Vedic religion, which is often cited as one of

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<sup>4</sup> Compare S. M. Heim's characterization of Hick's pluralism as a specifically modern and Western "mythos" that, rather than promoting an appreciation of the diversity of existing religions, in fact enters into competition with them (Heim, 1995, p. 214).

the principal sources of what later became Hinduism, we see evidence of ritual practices that involve the invocation and propitiation of multiple deities. Since, in many rituals, it would appear that one or other of the deities is accorded a privileged status, and yet the specific deity to which this status is accorded differs from one ritual to another, Max Müller applied the term *henotheism* to Vedic religion, defining this succinctly as “a successive belief in single supreme gods” (Müller, 1901, p. 277). Müller’s exposition of Vedic religion has not, however, gone undisputed. It has been contended, for example, that the idea that the ritual practitioners’ belief about which deity is supreme changes successively is unnecessarily extravagant; it is more likely that the conceptual boundaries between the various Vedic deities were fluid and that, in ritual contexts, exalted vocabulary was utilized in relation to whichever of the “intermingling” repertoire of deities was being addressed (Oldenberg, 1988, pp. 50–51, 59 n. 149). In view of these complexities, the importance of whether such an apparently indeterminate religious metaphysics should be dubbed “polytheism,” “pantheism,” “henotheism” or anything else diminishes in comparison to the need for careful contextualization and elucidation of the particularities of the religion as a whole.

Even if we stay within the parameters of the Hindu traditions, access is afforded to myriad further conceptions of divinity. Not only do we see among these traditions many representations of the divine as masculine and many others as feminine, but there are also instances in which masculine and feminine characteristics are overtly incorporated into a single depiction. To some extent, this is the case whenever male and female deities are portrayed as couples, whether it be Śiva and Pārvatī, Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī, Rāma and Sītā, Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, or any of numerous other pairings. Still more is the fusion accentuated when the couple is depicted as engaged in sexual intercourse, such as in Tantric imagery when the goddess Kālī is shown squatting over, and being penetrated by, a supine yet emphatically ithyphallic Śiva. Imagery of the latter sort is highly complex, since Kālī is patently represented as the dominant partner and the explicit eroticism of the image is problematized by the fact that the act of copulation is commonly portrayed as occurring in a cremation ground, with Śiva himself resembling a corpse (Dold, 2003, pp. 53–54).

The most intimate fusion of all comes in the form of Ardhanārīśvara (fig. 1) – literally “half-woman Lord” – whose body is depicted in Hindu mythology and iconography as comprising half that of Śiva and half that of Pārvatī, who in other stories plays the role of Śiva’s consort. In a myth associated with Ardhanārīśvara, a devotee of Śiva named Bhṛṅgi turns himself into a beetle so that he can bore through the dual-gendered deity and circumambulate Śiva alone (Garg, 1992, p. 598). As commentators have observed, this story imaginatively represents both an attempted reconciliation between Śiva-worshipping and Goddess-worshipping traditions and, at the same time, the tenacious sectarian allegiance of some devotees (Parthasarathy and Parthasarathy, 2009, p. 165). We thus see how an inquiry into myths and metaphysics can yield insights into self-representations of religious and cultural tendencies,

including relations between the sexes. To suppose that metaphysics is a sui generis sphere of human intellectual endeavour, detached from the vicissitudes of socio-political elements, would be to operate with an unduly idealized conception of the place that religious metaphysics has in human life.



Figure 1: Painting of Ardhanārīśvara, c. 1800. Wikimedia Commons ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ardhanarishvara#/media/File:Standing\\_Ardhanari\\_c.1800.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ardhanarishvara#/media/File:Standing_Ardhanari_c.1800.jpg)).

Hindu conceptions of divinity also famously, or notoriously, include ferocious as well as benign deities. Among the most aggressive and gruesome of these are certain members of the group of ten Tantric goddesses known as the Mahāvidyās or Great Wisdom goddesses, most notably Kālī, whom I mentioned above, plus Tārā, Chinnamastā and Bagalāmukhī, all of whom wield weapons and participate in the slaughtering of demons. Chinnamastā (“She whose head is severed,” fig. 2) is especially striking, as she is represented as standing on a copulating couple while holding her own severed head in one hand and a sword normally used for decapitating water buffaloes in the other. Out of her headless neck spurt three fountains of blood, one of which is pouring into the open mouth of her severed head and the other two of which are pouring into the mouths of two female attendants (Kinsley, 1997, p. 144). Since animal sacrifice constitutes part of the regular worship of ferocious Hindu goddesses, Hick would, no doubt, place them in the category of

“conceptions of God which conflict with the common ethical ideal of the great traditions” (Hick, 2004, p. 339). For more palatable conceptions, Hick and others who share his moral predilections might turn to orthodox Brahmanical Hindu traditions that favour beneficent representations of the divine and strictly vegetarian modes of worship.



Figure 2: Depiction of Chinnamastā; nineteenth-century lithograph. Wikimedia Commons ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chhinnamasta#/media/File:Bengali\\_Chinnamasta.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chhinnamasta#/media/File:Bengali_Chinnamasta.jpg)).

My point here, however, is that by deploying ethical criteria for determining which conceptions of divinity are to be treated with philosophical seriousness and which are to be rejected as “archaic” and “morally defective” (Hick, 2004, p. 339), one skews one’s appreciation of the diversity of religious metaphysics. Philosophers in search of the ultimate reality behind mythic representations are prone to characterize the representations that I have outlined in this section as merely phenomenal, as opposed to being accurate models of the noumenal reality. A comparable view is present amid the Hindu traditions themselves, classically articulated in the Advaita (“non-dual”) Vedānta philosophy of Śaṅkara, who maintained that any personification of the divine can, ultimately, be no more than a “meditative (upāsana) conceptualization of Brahman, the Absolute” (Devi, 2007, p. 93); in other words, when represented “with attributes” (*saguṇa*), Brahman is not the real Brahman, which, in itself, is “without attributes” (*nirguṇa*). But Advaita Vedānta, however influential it has been among



Brahmanical intellectuals and reformists, remains merely one among many competing theological positions within the polyphonic miscellany of the Hindu traditions. To treat it as supremely authoritative would be to display a philosophical prejudice in favour of the most abstract of metaphysical systems and against the numerous rougher or more colourful formulations of divinity. What I am proposing, then, could be put in terms of a radicalization of religious pluralism: an approach that, instead of habitually seeking syntheses and generalities, accords closer scrutiny to the “rough ground” of religious metaphysics – not always trying to tie up the loose ends, but rather (to echo another phrase from Wittgenstein) allowing what is ragged to remain ragged.<sup>5</sup> Before offering some concluding remarks, I shall elaborate on this point in the next section.

### Radicalizing Religious Pluralism

In one of his last essays, the Wittgenstein-influenced philosopher of religion D. Z. Phillips adopts the terms “radical pluralism” and “radical plurality” to capture the spirit of his approach to the study of religious diversity (Phillips, 2007). Although the term “radical pluralism” had previously been used in different ways by others, including John Cobb (1990, pp. 88, 92),<sup>6</sup> Phillips deployed it to differentiate his own approach from that of religious pluralists – or, as Phillips called them, *theological pluralists* – such as Hick. In contrast to the kind of theological pluralism that “insists on a spiritual affinity between the religions it praises,” Phillips’s style of radical pluralism neither insists on such an affinity nor seeks to praise, or decry, any specific religions (Phillips, 2007, pp. 204–205); instead, it aims to do “conceptual justice” to the variety of religions, “no matter what their character” (p. 205). To illustrate what he considers to be the proper task of the philosophy of religion, Phillips compares the philosopher to a dramatist who, in a theatrical work, places characters with competing perspectives in juxtaposition to one another without overtly trying to resolve differences or advocate any one perspective as superior. The purpose of such a dramatic work is to bring the diverse perspectives into sharper relief. Analogously, the philosopher contemplates differences, striving to set his or her own values aside so as to better understand the forms of life under examination (pp. 207–208).

The approach to the metaphysics of religious diversity that I have been commending in this article partakes in the spirit of Phillips’s radical pluralism. The approach requires a shift of philosophical priorities, away from grand speculative theorizing and towards a more fine-grained scrutiny of religious particularities. Many philosophers will complain that the approach is insufficiently metaphysical – indeed, insufficiently philosophical – because it adopts no explicit normative or evaluative

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<sup>5</sup> For the phrase “Back to the rough ground!”, see Wittgenstein (1953, §107); for his contention that “What’s ragged should be left ragged,” see Wittgenstein (1998, p. 51).

<sup>6</sup> See also, e.g., Jeanrond and Rike (1991).

stance in relation to the phenomena being studied; that is, it refrains from striving to establish which of the multifarious representations either of the divine or of some other metaphysical reality is the most viable or closest to the reality considered “in itself.” This avoidance of judgement, it may be contended, results in an impoverishment of the philosophical enterprise. As Schilbrack maintains, the “normative or evaluative or judgmental aspect of philosophy of religion is typical of philosophy in general” (2014, p. 177): it is precisely the “evaluation of truth claims, which means the assessment of reason-giving and arguments,” that constitutes “the distinctive contribution of philosophy of religion” to the multidisciplinary field known as the study of religion (2014, p. 25). The mistake made by those who conceive of philosophy in general, and of philosophy of religion in particular, in these terms is to underestimate the variety of forms that the “evaluation of truth claims” can take. Schilbrack and others are apt to characterize the sort of approach that I, in this article, have called an inquiry into diverse religious metaphysics as merely descriptive, where the “merely” adds a pejorative insinuation. The insinuation is that the description being supplied is simply the first stage of a project that must, if it is to become genuinely philosophical, go beyond description and take up a critical or normative stance. What is missed in such characterizations is the fact that description itself can play a critical role. It can do so, not by straying into the normative evaluation of the phenomena under examination, but by providing rich or “thick” descriptive accounts that undermine or call into question certain overgeneralizing assumptions about the objects of inquiry – assumptions that may have been previously held by the philosopher undertaking the descriptive investigation or by other philosophers and theorists about religion. In short, there is such a thing as a critically descriptive approach to philosophy.

To demonstrate such an approach in action would require more than a single article such as this,<sup>7</sup> but a hint is afforded in my treatment of Hindu representations of the divine in the previous section. My purpose in that section was to give a taste of the diversity of representations of the divine among the Hindu traditions. By doing so, certain overgeneralizing assumptions (or indeed “truth claims”), prevalent in the philosophy of religion, about what the concept of God or the divine consists in may be disrupted. Very rarely are non-Abrahamic conceptions of divinity treated seriously in Western philosophy of religion; and as I noted above, on the few occasions when they *are* treated seriously, the philosophical temptation is to exclude or marginalize the more concrete – and especially the more morally ambivalent – conceptions in favour of those that are more abstract and metaphysically austere. When this temptation is given in to, however, the result is a one-sided picture based on a monochrome palette of examples. Developing the inquiry further would require closer attention to how the mythological or metaphysical representations cohere with particular patterns of life, for it is when they are contextualized amid forms of ritual ceremony, liturgical recitation, narrative performance, moral instruction, artistic production, and so on,

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<sup>7</sup> For a more extensive venture, see Burley (2020a).

that the complex meanings of the representations are apt to become evident. Adapting a term from Peter Strawson (1985, p. 25), such exercises in deep contextualization and thick description could usefully be designated as modes of *connective analysis*, for they involve analysing connections between different elements of complex religio-cultural systems. This is, of course, what *anthropologists* of religion are generally concerned with, but it is also a genuinely philosophical activity, especially when emphasis is placed on the elucidation of central concepts – on, for example, what God, or a god or goddess, is understood to be, how persons are comprehended in relation to that divine reality, how a notion of life after death is tied to specific ethical injunctions, what “religious truth” amounts to for a given community, and so on. As I have suggested, the philosophical purpose becomes all the more salient when the connective analysis is deployed to raise suspicions about hasty and overgeneralizing philosophical assumptions concerning what the relevant concepts do or “must” consist in.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The pretensions of speculative metaphysics of the sort that I have here called the inquiry into ultimate reality are, in effect, the pretensions of an enterprise that wishes not merely to explain, or to explain away, existing religious conceptions of the divine, but to enter into competition with those religions by arriving at a conclusion about what ultimate reality “really” consists in. Even when the answer to that question stays as conceptually diaphanous as Hick’s notion of the Real, the pretension to specify which religions are worthy of respect, and hence which deserve philosophical attention, remains in place. My chief concern with these pretensions is not so much that they display a lack of intellectual humility, as that they militate against a fully rounded comprehension of religious diversity. The metaphysical affirmations of religious traditions are many and varied. A primary task of philosophy of religion ought to be to recognize and seek to do conceptual justice to that variety.

In the context of discussing the form of investigation that enquires into diverse religious metaphysics, I have intimated the variety to be found merely within the Hindu traditions. But we might also ask where, in philosophical discussions of religious diversity hitherto, is the recognition of, for example, African traditional religions, animistic traditions among Native Americans and other indigenous peoples, New Religious Movements, Neo-Pagans and practitioners of syncretistic modern forms of religiosity? Not all of these could be treated within a single philosophical discussion, but the problem is that participants in debates concerning religious pluralism tend to proceed as though the bewildering diversity both within religions and between them did not really exist. In the rush to find commonalities and potential points of convergence, the logically prior task of attending to the particularities – and doing so in ways that are not biased from the outset by a theologically homogenizing



agenda – is neglected. This article has been a plea for an appreciation of the importance of that task.

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