Flawed Objections to Religious Pluralism:
The Implications for Religious Education

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Religious fundamentalism is on the increase. Faiths exacerbate the growing antipathy that some societies feel for others. Barack Obama's election may have thwarted the Religious Right in the United States, but evangelical Christianity continues to grow in Africa and Asia, with the Pentecostal church expanding dramatically in South America. Bernard Lewis summed up the contemporary relationship between the West and Islam as a "clash of civilisations."[1]

Hence how any one faith regards others, or indeed different versions of itself, affects the health of pluralist democracies and international relations. In this essay, I argue that certain objections to religious pluralism are flawed, and that religious education should be informed by a modest religious pluralism. My intentions here are necessarily limited: I cannot pretend to be offering a full-blown defense of religious pluralism.

"Religion," a family resemblance term, is applied to beliefs involving a deity, an impersonal being not regarded as a creator, and even world views lacking a God.[2] However, theisms are central stage in the arguments whose weaknesses I discuss here.

Many American citizens are still exclusivist about their faith.[3,4] Philip Barnes defends a form of exclusivism: "if the beliefs of one religion are true, the beliefs of some other religion (or religions) must be false."[5] He also observes: "British religious education has abdicated its responsibility of preparing pupils to live in a religiously diverse society by failing to admit that the diversity of religions extends to incorporate a diversity of truth-claims."[6] Religious pluralisms oppose exclusivism. In Geoff Teece's pluralism, "The different religions represent different but comple-mentary revelations of the divine."[7] I defend a less ambitious pluralism, according to which truth claims of one religion do not *necessarily* exclude those of another.

According to Barnes we can "respect a person and…think that her beliefs are false, trivial or uninteresting."[8] This is orthodox liberal thinking. However, is our respect for others really separable from their *religious* commitments? Stephen Darwall distinguishes between appraisal respect and recognition respect.[9] In recog-nition respect we credit someone with status as a person. Such status derives at least in part from the very fact of recognition. Our attitude toward them disregards their qualities or talents. In contrast, we afford someone *appraisal respect* when valuing at least some of her or his personal characteristics. If respect could be detached from verdicts on beliefs it would have to be recognition respect.

However, religious conviction tests Darwall's account of respect to its limits. For religious belief can have profound implications for the status accorded to persons. I may value others' autonomy, rejoicing in their real ownership of beliefs and choices. Yet if, for instance, I think they worship a being whose very existence

I take my own faith to deny, my respect for them is seriously challenged. I can strive to *treat* them with respect. I may well believe that just because they are persons there is a moral imperative to respect them, whatever their religious beliefs and other qualities. Yet, since I think they are wrong about the true purpose of human existence, I may struggle to *feel* respect for them.

Defenders of liberal pluralism and the idea of overlapping consensus may not consider religious exclusivism a serious problem.[10] On their account, a pluralist democracy accommodates a range of religious and moral views in the form of citizens' "comprehensive doctrines." This is compatible with a shared conception of justice for the political arena in which different interest groups peacefully coexist. Such justice involves respect and basic liberties for everyone. "Reasonable" citizens in John Rawls's *Political Liberalism* believe that there are deep and difficult issues about which sensible people may disagree, and hence refrain from imposing their private views on others. Rawls thinks that most religious doctrines are "reasonable" and so would not undermine a political consensus in a liberal democracy.

However, it is arguable that a Rawlsian approach cannot solve the problem of exclusivist religious outlooks. Lasting consensus depends on sustainable universal respect for every individual. Religious exclusivism corrodes this consensus. Exclusivists are motivated to refrain from being *reasonable* in Rawls's sense. Because they feel that they "know" they are right and that this directly implies that others are wrong, for them, tolerating disagreement is *not* sensible. They may "lack a sense of justice and fail to recognize the independent validity of the claims of others."[11]

I note in passing a strong argument for religious pluralism that applies to *some* but not *all* faiths since it only makes sense for a Theistic system; the premises involve a concept of an all-powerful agent. Exclusivism about any one Theistic faith means that God has ordained for the others an inferior access to the Divine at best. The Roman Catholic Church in the past has proclaimed that the rest have no access at all.[12] And they are not alone in this. In the most extreme exclusivism, people who had the misfortune to live in the Stone Age, or the intelligent mollusks that might inhabit the fourth planet of an obscure star in the Lesser Magellanic Cloud are denied a route to the Almighty. This is clearly absurd. It postulates a "God" who is either remarkably inefficient or exercises arbitrary power. We are being asked to believe that God sponsors limited numbers for the business class route to Him, while the rest have economy class or have no ticket. Needless to say, acceptance of this internal argument against exclusivism need not lead believers to conclude that *all* religions are valid. The crucial point is to avoid ruling this out a priori.

In the last few years some writers have attempted to breathe new life into objections to religious pluralism, and I turn now to a discussion of key weaknesses in such objections. Barnes and Andrew Wright assert:

> The different descriptions of the religious object(s) in the various religions should not be regarded as having a common referent; the descriptions are not only different but in particular instances actually conflict.[13]

Ironically, this descriptivist understanding of reference does apply to *fictional* objects. A young reader confused Saruman and Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings.* These are two distinct (fictional) individuals, since Saruman answers to a set of descriptions including "wizard" and "master of the tower of Orthanc," while Sauron is described as "Morgoth's servant," "Ruler of Mordor," and so forth. Saruman is *whoever* (fictionally) meets these descriptions. If we change any of them, we are not talking about Saruman.

Barnes treats descriptions of transcendent deity along the same lines. If Christians describe a Trinitarian God, while Islam's depictions of Allah are strictly Unitarian, then on the descriptivist account, Christians are not talking about the same being as Islam.

The inadequacies of a descriptivist account of reference as a *comprehensive* theory were first exposed many decades ago. Here I merely summarize the relevant insights.

We can believe and say things *about* or *of* physical objects, people, events, states of affairs, fictional objects, abstract objects, and so on. It must be possible for Theists to believe and say things of or about God.

In the history of philosophical logic, "about" and "of" feature in two contrasting accounts. The first springs from the descriptive–intentional theory of reference held by Gottlob Frege and championed in the middle of the last century by philosophers such as P. F. Strawson, John Searle and Michael Dummett. Suppose Jones believes that the next door neighbor's daughter has blue eyes. The descriptive–intentional theory explains how Jones's belief is *about* or *of* a certain girl Jane as follows: (a) Jones must think that there is such a person as the next door neighbor's daughter, (b) he must believe that whoever is the next door neighbor's daughter has blue eyes, and (c) that girl the Jane must actually be the next door neighbor's daughter. The descriptive–intentional approach to *talking* of or about a particular entity is along similar lines.

This account is also applied to proper names. Consider "Jane has blue eyes." This sentence (or the corresponding belief) can be about an actual girl Jane where speakers with a language featuring the name "Jane" associate with that word a number of beliefs of the following type: Jane is the person with blue eyes, living at 21 Gas Lane, with Roger and Judy Brown as parents, and so on. Not every individual in the community will believe that Jane has *all* of these properties. But each individual will have a cluster of such beliefs, where there is sufficient overlap between the clusters for the name "Jane" to have a clear use in that community. Finally, the actual girl Jane really does possess a "sufficient" number of the properties involved in the community's cluster of beliefs.

The descriptivist–intentional construal of "God" runs as follows: Suppose Jones says, "God is looking after me," or believes this. Then he has said or believes something of, or about God, just so long as "God" is associated in Jones' speech community with a cluster of beliefs such as "God is a person" and "God is loving,"

Jones associates "most" of these beliefs with "God" and finally a real existent, God, fits these beliefs.

However, this descriptivist/intentional account fails to appreciate that definite descriptions have more than one use. Keith Donnellan showed that definite descriptions function in two ways.[14] In what he calls the "attributive" use, someone who says: "Smith's murderer is insane" on encountering a scene of death and destruction involving Smith, but who has no idea of the murderer's identity, means to talk of *whoever it is* that murdered Smith. The individual answering the description used is the person to whom the speaker refers with the definite description "Smith's murderer." "God" has characteristic descriptions associated with Him by each theistic religion. So a believer who talks of "the being who spoke to Moses on Sinai" would, if using this description attributively, refer to whoever it is that answers to that description. Descriptions applied to fictional entities function attributively.

Donnellan contrasts the attributive with the referential use.[15] Imagine a discussion of Jones' odd behavior at his trial, Jones having been charged with Smith's murder. We say, of Jones, that "Smith's murderer is insane." We use the description to call attention to a particular individual; another phrase or name would have sufficed. This differs from the attributive use, where it is essential that a particular individual answer to the description employed. Donnellan also points out that the referential use can succeed even where the referent fails to answer to the description concerned. Suppose that, unbeknownst to us, Smith committed suicide. If Jones discovers that we have said "Smith's murderer is insane," he could reasonably accuse us of saying false things about him. We may have referred to Jones, even though the description "Smith's murderer" does not fit him.

Saul Kripke reminded us of Frege and Bertrand Russell's view that a proper name is a disguised definite description.[16, 17] On such an account "Scott" would be equivalent to a description such as "the author of Waverley." According to Searle's sophisticated version, a name is linked to a cluster of descriptions rather than just one, and the referent of the name is whatever satisfies enough of these descriptions.[18] Kripke argues persuasively that this account does not fit all the important cases and offers his theory of "direct reference." Even when denying that someone satisfies some or even all of the descriptions conventionally linked to her we can successfully pick out an individual. Aristotle might not have satisfied any of the descriptions linked to him: "that Aristotle had this disjunction of properties is a contingent truth." [19] Biblical scholars hold that there was such a person as Jonah but that no one did the things commonly associated with him.

In Kripke's idealized story an "initial baptism" links a name to a particular individual for the first time. This is often when the individual to be named can be pointed out. For instance, a baby, destined to become a very famous physicist, is named by its parents "Richard Feynman." The use of this name is spread among their friends and acquires a place in their wider society. Later on someone might say, "Feynman went to New York in September". The speaker may succeed in referring to the actual man Feynman, the adult the baby has become, so long as a "certain

passage of communication reaching ultimately to the man himself does reach the speaker."[20] The speaker may be ignorant of physics and have entirely forgotten from whom he acquired the use of the name "Feynman." Links between speakers and their referents need not include an immediate sighting of the referent. For instance, we might refer "directly" to the person who has left an impression in a chair cushion.

William Alston applies Kripke's account of "direct reference" to God, attempting to flesh out what would constitute "initial baptism" here.[21] In what he acknowledges is a controversial move, he postulates that "God" can refer to something in people's experience. This need be nothing like a particular perception or specifiable experience. Nevertheless, he appreciates that "there must be some way in which it is communicated to others what entity it is to which the initiator was referring with 'God'."[22] He takes it that aspects of experience within a context of a community of worshippers supply both baptism and patterns of identifying reference which can be passed on.

Perhaps the referring expression "empirical reality" works in a similar fashion. It cannot be linked to a particular experience, or indeed to a particular type of experience. Yet a group of educated speakers can employ the phrase to make identifying references, and there is, arguably, a clear sense in which empirical reality plays an appropriate causal role in making this possible.

Alston realizes that much more work would need to be done for his account to be convincing. At the same time the bare bones of the theory certainly reflect theists' aims and practice. An adequate theory of reference to God should portray the process as resembling discourse about objects in the empirical world more closely than discourse about fictional and abstract items. Believers using the name "God" are attempting direct reference to a being. Their descriptions of God are intended, at least on some occasions, to be *referential* rather than *attributive.* Strictly speaking, for neo-Kripkean direct reference to succeed, it is only necessary for *some* believers to encounter the divine. However, according to faiths such as Christianity, God is immanent as well as transcendent, seeks a relationship with each individual He has created and hence can play an appropriate causal role in any individual's beliefs and discourse about Him. Hinduism lacks these doctrines, but in the increasingly theistic narratives of the *Bhagavad-Gita* Krishna could play an analogous role in the genesis of the relevant Hindu beliefs. Evidently in the nontheistic versions of Buddhism Alston's theories are not applicable.

Alston's approach sanctions reference to God even where believers associate the name with inadequate descriptions. Indeed, it is a central article of many faiths that we are unable to capture the transcendent divine nature using human concepts and language. Judaeo–Christian traditions talk about God as a person, but immediately offer radical qualifications. It is much easier, according to these religions, to say what God is not — the *via negativa,* than to say what He is.

Descriptions of God certainly vary from one religion to another and often seem to conflict. However, from the perspective of a direct account of reference it is still *possible* that people are *sometimes* speaking of the same God. If the descriptivist

account of proper names fails to cover some central cases of reference, it is a bad argument to move, for instance, from the premise that Christian characterizations of the Deity differ from those of Islam or Hinduism, to the conclusion that they must be characterizing different entities.

Nevertheless, we cannot just assume that the variety of descriptions present no challenges. More needs to be said about religious discourse. It is a familiar idea with a long heritage that language is often used "analogically" or "metaphorically" of God. This indirect or figurative use stems directly from transcendence.

An *ontologically* transcendent being is somehow distinct, separate, and different from everything else. "God is more distant from any creature than any two creatures are from each other."[23] Rudolf Otto's "wholly other" is a phrase associated with this idea.[24] Something with *epistemological* transcendence is beyond our knowledge and understanding. Evidently this could be a matter of degree. Believers might hold that their God's epistemological transcendence was temporary, and would vanish in an afterlife. On the other hand, epistemological transcendence might be deemed a matter of principle, being an inevitable consequence of ontological transcendence.

God's transcendence implies that even those divine properties that other things can share, such as personhood, differ radically from their mundane counterparts. For example, in "God is a person," personhood differs from all human exemplifications. However, "person" is not subject to lexical ambiguity here. Attributing personhood to God relates human personhood to God's in some profound way. In contrast, lexical ambiguity afflicts "bank" in "She went to the bank," which might involve a trip to a financial institution *or* to the edge of a river. Riverbanks and financial banks have no affinities.

Does an appeal to metaphor elucidate the resemblances and differences between human and divine personhood? We are being given to understand that "God is a person" is related to "Jones is a person" in a way that is somehow comparable to how "The question is hard" is related to "The chair is hard." Now, claiming a metaphorical status for "God is a rock" concedes that He is not, literally speaking, a rock — of granite constitution, perhaps. So does awarding metaphorical status to "God is a person" mean that God is not really a person? That implication would alarm many religious believers. Is the metaphorical gambit a poor one?

Compare this example with a number of nonreligious cases, including instances of "irreducible metaphor" noted by Alston.[25] Alston cites mental state descriptions such as "the stabbing pain" and "she feels depressed." These are, as he puts it "in the position of metaphors that cannot die."[26] Searle offers instances of spatial language used about time, including "time flies," "the hours crawled by," and "I don't want to cut my stay short."[27] Again, a denial that time flies, on the grounds that we are speaking metaphorically, seems inappropriate. Time really does fly sometimes, despite the fact that denying this might appear, quite sensibly, to exclude the possibility that time can literally travel through the air. I conclude that awarding "God is a person" metaphorical status places it in good company, and that crediting

some transcendence language with metaphorical status is still worthy of consideration.

If some transcendence language is *irreducibly* metaphorical then there can be no literal translation, any more than there is for "stabbing pain" and "time flies." Paraphrases would merely introduce new sets of metaphors. Hence, literal comparisons cannot be made across religions. Literally incompatible phrases may sometimes be reconciled when understood metaphorically. For instance: "He spoke *bluntly*;" "he made some *penetrating* comments;" "as the light grew he could see her brow darkening;" and "time grows short." So in some cases, at least, if metaphor features in characterizations of and claims about God, the appearance of tensions between different religions may be deceptive. I am *not*, of course, claiming that metaphors about the divine *never* conflict — a modest religious pluralism concedes this possibility too.

Note also the holist features of concepts within any one set of religious doctrines. The concept of personhood applied to the Christian God draws some of its very meaning and identity from how it relates to a range of other key divine properties, such as agency, goodness, power, and so on. Suppose, then, we wanted to assess the relationship between the Christian's "God is a person" and a Hindu's "Brahman is impersonal." On a pluralist thought experiment that somehow "God" and "Brahman" refer to the same entity we are confronted with apparent conflict. Yet we cannot compare these claims directly. Any attempt to do so implies that we can abstract elements from their networks, assess their stand-alone meaning, and compare them across different world faiths. Such abstraction would undermine the meaning of those elements.

Some may feel that these moves are too successful. A religion can, apparently, say absolutely anything about its God. For, in my narrative, such divine characterizations cannot be judged to be unacceptably odd on the basis of a literal reading. Moreover, they cannot be directly compared with their traditional counterparts in any case because of holist considerations. Christianity believes in a personal Creator who loves His creatures. Yet within my perspective, the objection could run, those worshipping a volcano that periodically "eats" creatures may be focusing on the same being as the Christian's God.

Such an objection makes a straw man of my position. I am arguing that the appearance of tension, or even of contradiction between descriptions offered by the various world faiths does not mean that the truth claims of one faith necessarily rule out any others. This is not an endorsement of all systems and cults.

Objectors to pluralism are unlikely to be satisfied. They could argue as follows: The devout Christian, for instance, insists that Christ is the Son of God and this excludes Islamic conceptions of Allah according to which the very idea of incarnation detracts from His absolute transcendence and simplicity.

My response is that the imagined scenario *builds in* exclusivist interpretations of Christianity and Islam, interpretations that beg the question against me. So the Moslem is characterized as denying the divinity of Christ, and the Christian as ruling

out the Islamic notion of Allah because it precludes incarnation. However, this reply does *not* imply that there are no deep disagreements between the different world faiths. It relates rather to the more modest point that many prima facie conflicts need not be real ones.

An understanding of at least something of the irreducibly figurative character of claims about a transcendent God is an important part of education worthy of the name. It is vital, both for the continuing health and even stability of pluralist democracies and for constructive relationships between nations on the world stage.

Religious education informed by a moderate religious pluralism is *not* a failure to take difference seriously. Religious education should, among other things, help all students to appreciate that people who appear to believe and practice faiths very different from theirs may have something just as valuable in terms of potential to access the divine.

How might this be done? Space here only permits some brief pointers. Most school-age students cannot grapple with Kripke's theories of reference or philo-sophical accounts of metaphor. But they could be encouraged to compare seemingly diverse religious claims with nonreligious examples featuring rival yet somehow *complementary* accounts. Consider narratives about human meanings, actions, and relationships. These may be encountered in certain kinds of qualitative research within social science, literature, and, of course, in everyday human experience. The "same" reality is amenable to a range of characterizations, many or all of which are valuable and yet sometimes they appear to conflict. Arguably, judgments about the arts also provide further examples; equally well-informed critics on occasion reach seemingly conflicting verdicts, yet it is too simplistic to assume that at least one of them *must* be wrong or that the evaluations concerned are merely subjective. A range of judgments may be capturing different aspects of a complex aesthetic reality.[28]

Moderately pluralist religious education should be offered in faith schools, common schools and in tertiary education. The liberal educational aim of respecting others regardless of religious beliefs is, as I urged earlier, going against the grain of human nature. We should not abandon it entirely, but it must be supplemented by a curriculum that develops a sophisticated appreciation of the range of positive relationships that may subsist between the truth claims of one faith and of another.

Pluralism has long influenced religious education in the United Kingdom. I argue that even given the Constitutional restrictions on religious education in the United States, an appropriate consideration of these questions should inform the treatment of comparative religion in their public system.

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4. Jenny Trinitapoli, "'I KNOW THIS ISN'T PC, BUT…': Religious Exclusivism Among U.S. Adolescents," *Sociological Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2007): 451–83.

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6. Barnes, "Michael Hand, is Religious Education Possible?" 69.

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10. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

11. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 52.

12. As, for instance in the Papal Bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302) or the Council of Florence's decree that "no one outside the Catholic Church, neither pagans nor Jews nor heretics nor schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Quoted by Terrence Tilley, "Christian Orthodoxy And Religious Pluralism: A Rejoinder To Gavin D'costa," *Modern Theology* 23, no. 30 [2007]: 271–84).

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22. Alston, "Referring to God," 119.

23. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa* (1a 13 5), trans. Herbert McCabe (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964).

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28. I discuss these themes in some depth in Andrew Davis, "Consistency, Understanding and Truth in Educational Research," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 40, no. 4 (2006): 487–500.