J.S.K. Ward
Oxford

THE QUESTION OF TRUTH IN RELIGION

Religions typically make claims to state truths about the nature of the universe and of human destiny. Even religious traditions which stress praxis more than theoretical assent, like some versions of Buddhism, cannot avoid making specific truth-claims – about the way to overcome sorrow, about the fact that it can be overcome and about the causal structure of reality, for example. The issue of truth, however difficult it is to deal with in religion, is a central one. If one is not careful, however, a stress on issues of truth can lead to unhelpful arguments and polemical defensiveness. This has led some recent Christian thinkers to take the view that there is not just one set of truths, which some part of the Christian tradition has go right. Rather, truth in religion is itself plural. There are many truths, or many ways of understanding truth. This seems at first sight a much more tolerant view than one which says that only my tradition has the truth. In this paper I shall examine one very influential statement of a pluralist view, that set out by John Hick. I shall suggest that the pluralist approach is not sustainable, and that one cannot evade conflicts of truth. Nevertheless, one need not claim unrevisable certainty and completeness, and it is unlikely that only one religious tradition has all the truth. Thus a rational attitude will consist in adopting a revisable commitment to what is held to be basically correct, though admittedly partial, apprehension of the nature of ultimate reality and the proper human goal in relation to it. Such a commitment can be enhanced by an appreciation of what other traditions have to say, and by a positive conversation between traditions which may bring new depths of insight to each of them.

According to John Hick's pluralist hypothesis, every religious tradition is a way to salvific relationship with 'the Real', and one cannot say that any tradition contains more truth than any others. All the 'great traditions' are 'more or less equally effective' soteriologically, and 'truth lies in soteriological effectiveness', that is, in

effectiveness to convey salvation or liberation.[1] This blunt statement of what seems to be a pragmatic theory of truth brings out the main difficulty with the pluralistic hypothesis, which is its treatment of the concept of truth. Hick says that 'the great world traditions constitute different conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the Real from within the different cultural ways of being human.'[2] With that I am in strong agreement. But he goes on, much more controversially, to suggest that the divine personae and metaphysical impersonae – that is, gods like Allah, Jahweh and Vishnu, and the Tao, Nirguna Brahman and Sunyata – are 'real as authentic manifestations of the Real'.[3] If one is to speak of *authentic* manifestations then, as a matter of logic, inauthentic manifestations must be possible; there must be some difference between authentic and inauthentic manifestations. What makes a god or metaphysical principle an authentic manifestation of the Real? The obvious thought is that an authentic manifestation gives a more adequate expression of what the Real actually is, whereas an inauthentic manifestation gives an inadequate or even misleading idea of it. For example, the idea of the Real as a blind purposeless source of energy is less authentic than an idea of it as a person, which is, in turn, less adequate than the idea of it as 'that a greater than which cannot be conceived.'

Unfortunately, Hick deprives himself of this possibility of discerning more or less adequate expressions of the Real, since he says, 'The Real *an sich*.... cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating.'[4] If nothing at all can be said of the Real, then one cannot say that some expressions are more authentic manifestations of it than others. Indeed, we cannot say that anything is a manifestation of it at all, since that would make it a causal substratum. If A manifests B, then A must be caused by B. But that means that B must be described as 'a cause,' and we are not allowed to say that either. Why not omit the concept of the Real altogether, especially since we should not really say that it is real or unreal, in any case?

1. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 369 & 373.
2. Op. Cit., 376.
3. Op. Cit., 242.
4. Op. Cit., 350.

Hick's attitude to the Real is ambivalent in the extreme. Since everything that exists is real in some sense, the expression 'the Real' seems almost vacuous. One could be speaking of the real fog or the real mathematical equation. It needs to be given some content. Hick does this by admitting that 'we can make certain purely formal statements about the postulated Real in itself'.[5] Such statements, he says, include Anselm's formula, defining God as 'that than which no greater can be conceived'. This does indeed capture the element of unsurpassable value that is essential to a religious conception of the Real; but it is far from being purely formal. It clearly entails the possession of perfect goodness, since no being can be unsurpassably valuable without being good, together with whatever other properties belong to a supremely perfect being. These properties need to be worked out by reflection and there may be disagreement about them, especially in detail; but one has here the basis for a much more specific concept of 'the Real' as an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being.

In practice Hick does work with such a concept; for he says that "most forms of religion have affirmed a salvific reality that transcends human beings and the world".[6] He thus assumes a unitary being that is of greater value than anything in the cosmos and that is 'salvific'; that is, has the power to bring humans to a "limitlessly better state." In one sense, he is not really a pluralist at all – that is, a person who really believes that all the great religious traditions are equally authentic. For he restricts the traditions he counts as authentic to those which accept the existence of a salvific transcendent reality. Many traditions do speak of such a reality; but not all. Paul Williams, himself a follower of Tibetan Buddhism, writes that for his tradition 'there is no Being, no Absolute, at all.'[7] There are religious traditions which deny any transcendent Real; others which assert more than one; and yet others which explicitly deny the unknowability of the Real. Thus it does not seem possible to find any non-vacuous concept of 'the Real' which all traditions could accept as the substratum of their beliefs.

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5. Op. Cit., 246.
6. Op. Cit., 6.
7. Paul Williams, *Some Dimensions of the Recent Work of Raimundo Panikkar*, in *Religious Studies*, 27, 4, December, 1991 (Cambridge University Press).

To support his case, Hick quotes a number of authoritative sources from a range of religions to show that ineffability is a common characteristic of the ultimately Real. "The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao" (*Tao Te Ching*); God is "incapable of being grasped by any term" (Gregory of Nyssa); "*Nirguna Brahman* is such that all words fall back from attaining it" (Sankara). Inexpressibility by any human concepts is certainly a feature of the ultimate object of devotion or striving in many religious traditions. And it may seem a short move from saying that two ideas are of an ineffable reality to saying that they are of the same reality; for what could distinguish two ineffables?

Such an argument would be invalid, however. If X is indescribable by me, and Y is indescribable by me, it does not follow that X is identical with Y. On the contrary, there is no way in which X could be identified with Y, since there are no criteria of identity to apply. It is rather like saying, "I do not know what X is; and I do not know what Y is; therefore X must be the same as Y. If I do not know what either is, I naturally do not know whether they are the same or different. To assert identity is thus to commit the quantifier-shift fallacy, of moving from "many religions believe in an ineffable Real" to "there is an ineffable Real in which many religions believe." Indeed, we have good reason to distinguish the ineffable God of Gregory of Nyssa, who is after all truly said to be the one perfect cause of all finite things, from the ineffable posited by Zen Buddhism, which is said to be beyond all duality of good and evil, creator and created.[8]

Traditional doctrines of the ineffability of the religious object cannot plausibly be taken to support the idea that there is one wholly unknowable Real *an sich*, perceived in different and equally adequate ways in the world religions. For the fact is that each tradition has its own "correct" description of the Real, or of the nature of reality, to offer; and the thesis of ineffability serves not to undermine such descriptions, but to affirm that the Real is more than, but decidedly neither less nor wholly other than, what is describable by their conceptual frameworks.

8. This argument is taken from: Keith Ward, *Truth and the Diversity of Religions* in *Religious Studies* 26, Dec., 1990 (Cambridge University Press). pp. 1-18.

Justification, Truth and Salvation

Why, then, should Hick wish to assert that the great religious traditions are all authentic appearances of one unknowable Real? He states that he postulates it because we cannot reasonably claim "that our own form of religious experience . . . is veridical whilst the others are not".[9] The argument, which derives from Kant's treatment of the Antinomies of Reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, goes like this:

1. A is justified in thinking that what seems to her to be the case probably is the case, in the absence of strong countervailing reasons. So if A seems to apprehend God's presence, she is justified in thinking that God is in fact present.

2. B is similarly justified in believing that reality is non-dual, on the basis of her experiences of *samadi*.

3. Since "A is me" is not a relevant reason for giving A's views greater force than B's, A and B are equally justified in believing contradictory things.

4. There is no good reason for preferring one view to another equally justified view.

5. Contradictory beliefs can be true of appearances, though not of Reality.

6. Therefore all such beliefs are true of appearances but not of Reality-in-itself.

However much one tries to refine this argument, it will be invalid or self-defeating. In the first place, the situation in which two people are justified in believing contradictory things is not uncommon. For example, a thousand years ago someone might have been justified in believing the earth was flat; but most people today are justified in believing it is roughly round. There is no reason to suppose that all justified beliefs are true. In fact, if I am justified in believing X, I am equally justified in believing that not-X is false. So A has a good reason for believing that B's belief is false, and B has a similarly good

9. Hick, Op. Cit., 235.

reason for believing A's belief is false. Proposition 4 does not in any way follow from 1,2 or 3. To say that A and B are equally justified in believing X and not-X, respectively, is not to say that one and the same person is so justified. The argument shows only that different people are justified in believing contradictory things. Thus there is a good reason, for A, for preferring one view to its contradictory; namely, that she is justified in doing so. The same is true of B. But there is no one person who is justified in believing both X and not-X. What does follow from this argument is that one believer, or possibly both, is not in a good position to know all the relevant facts. So it becomes important to try to broaden one's experience to make sure that one can give the widest consideration to as many sorts of relevant data and argument as possible.

The argument is also self-defeating, as becomes clear if one considers the case of someone, A, who holds that X (e.g., that God is good) is true of Reality in itself, while B denies this. Then A is justified in believing that X is true of Reality in itself. But the conclusion (6) asserts that X is not true of Reality in itself. So, by the argument, A is justified in believing X only if X is false, which is absurd. Some of the steps of the argument must be modified; 4 has already gone; and now 5 and 6 must go too. One is left with the coherent, if slightly depressing, view that people are often justified in believing conflicting things, though they cannot all be right. However, Hick himself accepts this situation when it comes to disputes about whether there is any future good to be looked for in human life. He says, "the issue . . . is ultimately a factual one in which the rival world-views are subject to eventual experiential confirmation."[10] I am simply pointing out that the same must be true of many religious disputes, when I must admit that someone is mistaken and I am not going to think it is me.

Of course this is not a matter of "all or nothing." I need not say that all my truth-claims are valid and none of anyone else's is. An obvious move is to see all religious experiences as subject to conceptual interpretation, which will qualify the character of the experience. The validity of the experience will depend on the accuracy of the interpretation. It may well be true that no interpretation is

10. Op. Cit., 13.

adequate to the richness and complexity of the religious object. One will have a range of more or less adequate interpretations, caused in part by an object which transcends any of them in some respects. The practical consequence is that I will be on the lookout for restrictive and unduly partial elements in my own belief-system, and for elements in other traditions which may complement my own.

It is necessarily the case that not all propositions reporting experiences of the Real can be true. There must be some distinction between true and false, between authentic and inauthentic manifestations of the Real. That entails that we have some true information about the Real, and therefore that some beliefs in religion must be false. Hick makes one last attempt to avoid this conclusion, by suggesting that statements about the Real may be "mythologically true". A statement is said to be mythologically true if it "tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to X."[11] Exactly the same problem recurs here, for if some attitudes are appropriate (love and wisdom) then others must be inappropriate (hate and resentment). How can one tell which are appropriate without knowing something true about X? It seems that Hick wishes to eliminate factual considerations and make a preferential selection solely on the basis of the "soteriological efficacy" of a religion. But a religion is soteriologically efficacious only if it succeeds in leading one to the true goal of human life. All the problems about what the true goal is will recur yet again.

The only way left to Hick is to interpret soteriological efficacy solely as moral heroism or the achievement of spectacular virtue. The problem is that many clearly false ideologies can lead to morally heroic conduct on the part of believers, from Marxist-Leninism to Existentialist Humanism. Moral efficacy may be one test of an acceptable belief; but it is not even a necessary condition of a belief's being true, much less a sufficient one. As Harold Netland points out in his discussion of Hick's thesis,[12] since the Real *an sich* is neither good nor evil, how can one have an ethical criterion for distinguishing appropriate from inappropriate responses to the Real?

11. Op. Cit., 348.
12. Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 227.

Hick asserts that 'it seems implausible that our final destiny should depend upon our professing beliefs... concerning which we have no definitive information'.[13] But the very concept of what salvation is involves beliefs which are theoretically unsettlable. Even Hick's own belief that there is a proper goal of human activity is unsettlable, but that does not stop him from holding it. If there is such a goal, one may assume that it will not be attained without correct belief about what it actually is. In this sense the possession of some particular beliefs is necessary to salvation. People without those beliefs will not attain salvation, for the simple reason that salvation consists in attaining a state which entails possessing such beliefs; i.e., it entails that one knows what salvation is and that one has attained it.

If, however, one is asking whether any beliefs are requisite *now* if one is to have a reasonable hope of attaining salvation later, Hick seems to me correct in thinking that if there is a God of universal love, he will not make our loss of eternal life dependent merely upon making an honest mistake. So one might suppose that a positive response to whatever seems to be good and true, by a conscience as informed as one can reasonably make it, is sufficient to dispose one rightly towards salvation.[14] As the Roman Catholic document *Gaudium et Spes* puts it, salvation is attainable by 'all men of good-will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly'.[15] In brief, being set on the way to salvation does not depend on holding Christian beliefs; but being ultimately saved will depend on acceptance of the basic truths about Christ as Divine self-revelation - at least, if they are indeed truths. Other religions will naturally make analogous claims. Thus a Buddhist may hold that it is not necessary to accept Buddhism in order to follow the course of life that is most appropriate now for a given individual. To achieve final liberation, however, one must have correct (Buddhist) beliefs about the way to the ending of sorrow. Each religion must make the same logical move. Naturally, they cannot all be ultimately true.

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13. Hick, Op. Cit., 369.
14. This is essentially the position argued for with force by Karl Rahner; cf. *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (trans. W. Dych, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978), ch. 6, section 10.
15. *Gaudium et Spes*, in W. M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966).

Criteria of Rationality in Religion.

It is possible to distinguish a hard and a soft version of pluralism. The hard pluralist will assert that all great traditions are equally authentic manifestations of ultimate truth; and that, I have argued, is incoherent. The soft pluralist will assert that the Real can manifest in many traditions and humans can respond to it appropriately in them. One may hold that view, while also holding that such traditions may contain many false beliefs. Hick explicitly states this in any case, holding that 'the basic fact of innumerable broad oppositions of religious doctrines remains'.[16] The Real at least begins the process of uniting human lives to itself in many religious systems. However, the presence of false beliefs is bound to affect the way the Real is conceived and represented. After all, the Real is mediated through human concepts and experiences, and it will be characterised in terms of those concepts. To the extent that they are deficient or false, therefore, one would expect that there would be deficient or false views of the Real in such systems. As Karl Rahner says, man's attempt to know God' is only partially successful, it always exists within a still unfinished history, it is intermixed with error, sinful delusions and their objectifications'.[17] If that is so, not all views of the Real can be equally authentic, and ways must be found of distinguishing between them.

It is implausible to suppose that the Real inspires prophets in only one tradition, and that it does so in a wholly inerrant manner. The idea that God infallibly inspired some of Paul's letters, some hymns and proverbs, some historical chronicles and law-codes, and nothing else in the same way, privileges one revelatory tradition in a way that seems completely arbitrary, unless a very good reason can be given for such preference. As I have argued, exactly the same sorts of reasons can be, and are, given, albeit by different persons, for preferring incompatible revelations. Hick is right in suggesting that one must see Divine inspirational activity at work in many cultures, where people seek to meditate on the ultimate nature of things in

16. John Hick, Op. Cit., p. 363.

17. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978), p. 173.

relation to a suprasensory realm. In the late twentieth century believers are called, as Cantwell Smith has argued, to a wider view of how God is working in the great religious traditions of the world, so that 'henceforth the data for theology must be the data of the history of religion.'[18] They are called to affirm that God is encountered through the symbols of many traditions and that none of them is complete, in the sense of needing to learn nothing from others. Yet one may and indeed one is logically compelled to find in those cultures and in their history reasons for preferring some patterns of canonical revelation to others, and in that sense find a more adequate view of the Real in some traditions, and perhaps in one tradition, than in others, even though the others are not uninspired and the most adequate is not in every respect inerrant.

If one asks how one can decide between competing religious authorities, it is quite unrealistic to think of this as a decision made from a completely neutral position, as though one was a discarnate Reason impartially assessing all religious positions and then opting for one. As soon as one begins to reflect, one will already have a set of learned beliefs, a set of characteristic interests and evaluations which will influence one's thoughts and responses. One will have grown up in a culture and in a historical setting which provides a noetic framework into which all new information must fit, whether by easy integration or by a more radical restructuring of the framework. Some doctrines will seem more compatible with one's factual beliefs than others, to be able to integrate various sorts of knowledge into a coherent whole, and to give more adequate interpretations of human existence.

It seems to me quite false to say, however, as Gavin D'Costa argues,[19] that 'there are no neutral criteria for adjudicating between religions'; so one can only judge religions 'by the criteria and standards of one's own traditions.' There are some very basic rational criteria which can be brought to bear upon all claims to truth, in religion as elsewhere. Rationality involves the use of intelligent capacities, including the capacity to register information correctly, to

18. W.C. Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 126.
19. Gavin D'Costa, *Whose Objectivity? Which Neutrality?* in *Religious Studies*, 29, March, 1993.

compare similar pieces of information, to deduce and infer in accordance with rules of logic and relate means to ends effectively. A rational person can act on a consciously formulated principle in order to attain an intended goal. In all human societies, however odd they may look, it is necessary to the pursuit of a social life that individuals agree on how to obtain basic perceptual information, on how to draw inductive conclusion from it and on how to use that information to obtain agreed ends (like obtaining food and warmth). Such simple forms of reasoning are necessary to any form of intelligently ordered social life. They are not, and cannot be, culturally relative.

However many strange rules a society has, it must at least have those basic rules of co-operative action which are necessary to its existence as a community. There is therefore a minimal level of rationality present in all societies, which does not vary from one society to another. Minimally, to be rational in any society is to be capable of collecting and ordering information, deducing and inferring, and relating information to the attainment of formulated goals. If one is not capable of doing that, one is not even capable of receiving and conveying revealed information correctly; or at least one cannot be justifiably thought to be capable of doing so.

If one asks to what 'tradition' these basic criteria of rationality-self-consistency, coherence with other knowledge and adequacy to available data - belong, the answer must be that they belong to the tradition of being human, as such. Not all humans may exhibit them; perhaps few exhibit them anywhere near fully. But they are principles of rationality which are built into the necessary structure of human social life, and thus function as desirable ideals for any community that wishes to survive for any length of time.

All truth-claims must be consistent, since a self-contradiction entails that one can prove anything at all, including the falsity of one's own deepest beliefs - which is hardly satisfactory for a believer.[20] All truth-claims must be compatible with what one takes to be well-established knowledge with regard to facts and morals. Truth-claims should be adequate to the various sorts of experience one takes to

20. The proof is simple and well-known. If (P and not P), then, since P entails (P or Q), and [(P or Q) and (not P)] entails Q, Q must be true, whatever Q may be.

be non-delusory. And they should aim at as unified a perspective on the world as possible, though this is an ideal rather than a requirement.[21] Naturally, agreement in the use of such criteria does not necessitate agreement in conclusions. One can seek to eliminate an inconsistency by adjusting various other beliefs, or by interpreting some of those beliefs in an analogical or metaphorical sense. One may dispute as to what knowledge is well-established in matters of fact or morality. One may evaluate different sorts of experience differently. One may attempt to integrate different types of knowledge in a number of different ways. Personal judgment and disagreement is ineliminable. The use of these rational criteria does not serve to pick out one religion as the only true one. It serves to encourage a re-assessment and revision of particular religious claims in the search for a truly comprehensive and integrated view of the world within which revelatory claims will make sense. So it is still immensely important to maintain that rationality is present in religion as elsewhere, and that it is not different in kind from rationality in general.

But what of the particular counter-examples D'Costa mentions? Do they indeed show that even basic rational criteria are much more tradition-constituted than one might have thought? When looked at in detail, they are hardly convincing. His first example is Zen Buddhists, who are alleged to hold that '*satori* transcends logical conceptuality.' He also mentions that many people hold that the concept of the Trinity is contradictory; and of course one can find Christians who write as though it is. Emil Brunner, for example, writes that 'The idea of God bursts through and destroys all the fundamental categories of thought: the absolutely antithetical character of the basic logical principles of contradiction and identity'.[22] However, in the same book he also writes: 'That which seems to be a double truth, that is, the equal truth of contradictory statements, always proves to be either the result of drawing an inadequate distinction between various aspects of a question or of exceeding on one side or the other the rightful limits of the subject in question'.[23] Precisely so!

21. These criteria are implicit in all rational activity; they agree with those set out, for example, in Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 192.
22. Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 47.
23. Op. Cit., 205.

that concepts are suited only to deal with finite spatio-t a straightforward way and that there are realities th ut if so, they cannot be said in contradictions either. Th m D'Costa refer may be saying that there are cognitive no ptual states. If so, they are literally indescribable, and all one can do is evoke them by the use of various techniques. With regard to the idea of God's mercy and justice, which Brunner suggests are contradictory, one needs only to say that these terms are analogies which must both be applied to God, on grounds of revelation. They are not contradictions, but inadequate attempt to articulate the Divine nature, which we cannot grasp in itself. Like the wave-particle duality in physics, they may seem like contradictions to the uninformed, but they have a consistent application in fact. It is the analogous nature of the concepts that saves them from contradiction.

It may seem that the principle of contradiction cannot function as a criterion for the acceptance of revelation, or authoritative teaching, if revelation offers concepts which seem contradictory to us. However, the principle of contradiction in fact plays a vital role in such cases. It shows that such concepts are used analogously; that the Divine nature is not straightforwardly describable; and therefore that many of the logical inferences we might otherwise draw from such concepts are precluded precisely by the analogous nature of these concepts. It shows the necessity for a very sophisticated theology of Divine ineffability and prevents us from saying that such concepts apply to God in the way we understand them in other contexts. It is vital that one should continue to maintain that revelation cannot contradict other knowledge and that it cannot simply be expressed in contradictions. If this is correct (and I suspect that it is) the principle of contradiction helps to show that the Divine reality does transcend human conceptual abilities, but that acquaintance with it may be realised by training the mind both to use concepts in a certain way and finally to transcend them.

There remains a difference between the Zen and the Christian claims mentioned here. Zen speaks of acquaintance with a non-dual reality in which all distinctions fall away; whereas apophatic theology speaks of an ineffable Godhead which is yet distinct from the cosmos, though it may be imaged in the cosmos in certain ways. Logical criteria naturally cannot be used to 'choose' between these variant interpretations. That is done by a much more complex process of critically assessing the case

for non-dualism and for Divine ineffability respectively [illegible] what the consequences are for one's basic moral [illegible] and how they could integrate into one's own co[illegible]t is no part of my case that one can stand on neu[illegible]ose with objectively dispassionate criteria between all [illegible] But it is an important part of rational believing that one should use rational criteria, which are universal in that every person uses them even while denying it, to articulate and render more coherent one's own view of human existence.

The other example D'Costa gives of a radical incommensurability of criteria is the dispute between free-will theodicists and those who reject all theodicies as immoral. But in fact participants on both sides of this dispute (which is internal to the Christian tradition anyway, and thus is not an example of 'different traditions' having different criteria of rationality) accept the same rational criteria of assessment. Both see a *prima facie* inconsistency between God's power and goodness and the suffering of the innocent. Some think that the charge of strict logical inconsistency can be rebutted by appeal to a possible greater good, while others argue that suffering can never be justified in terms of a greater good. Both agree that they cannot see this greater good with any clarity. What remains is a difference of value-judgment which is amenable to further assessment in terms of consistency, coherence and adequacy within a wider worldview, but which cannot be decided neutrally or in isolation. Logical considerations will lead one set of disputants to deny objective metaphysical reference to the concept of God and to take the consequences for such beliefs as the resurrection. They will lead the other set of disputants to insist on life after death and on real causal agency in God. Rational considerations force various consequences on the disputants; but of course they cannot decide what ultimate axioms or basic principles will be accepted. This illustrates the important point that agreement in rational criteria does not eliminate all differences in basic value-judgments. It may in fact make such differences sharper, as one is forced to make a choice consistent with one's own more general attitudes.

Religion is not just a matter of theoretical belief. When a religious tradition is contemplated, some of its central myths will resonate more than others and seem to illuminate human experience more; some forms of religious experience will match one's own feelings more

closely and suggest fruitful ways of extending one's own experiences; some ritual practices will seem more natural and effective and less superstitious or manipulative of the suprasensory realm; and some ethical rules and ideals will seem more consonant with one's own moral beliefs than others and to extend one's own insights more deeply and widely. It is not that a religious system has to fit one's noetic framework before it is acceptable; that would make any notion of revelation hard to sustain. But in a world of conflicting claimants to revelation some systems will seem better candidates than others to people with particular noetic frameworks.

It seems, then, that there are general rational criteria to be applied in matters of religion, and that they are much the same as those to be applied in matters of human belief generally. One looks for consistency, coherence with other knowledge, integrating power and adequacy to experience. One needs to bear in mind that religious beliefs operate in the context of cultural forms which have their own impact on human minds, and by which particular minds will have been shaped. There is no question of a neutral adjudication between religions. It is unintelligible to think that one could *decide* between religious beliefs. One cannot decide to believe something, though one can decide to do things which may be likely to bring one to hold specific beliefs. Belief, however, is basically assent to what seems to be true, and all human beings begin from a set of beliefs which seem true to them, prior to any conscious process of decision.

Individuals respond to the impact of the supernatural as it has come to them in their own historical situation. The rational criteria operate as methodological principles for critical reflection, not as rules for producing correct answers. The rational course is to commit oneself to a tradition of revelation, which delivers one from the pretence that one can work out the truth entirely for oneself. Such commitment should, however, involve an acceptance that the supreme Reality has not been silent in the other religions of the world, which delivers one from a myopia which confines God to one small sector of human history. A comparative theology is the beginning of a true and serious conversation, which has the possibility of holding together critical thought and loyalty to revelation in a positive way, and which may enable diverse religious traditions to live together in respect and in conscientious disagreement.