The Next Pluralistic Philosophy of Religions

I. Introduction

John Hick has used revolutionary metaphors in recommending his pluralistic philosophy of religions. To turn from a focus on the particulars of one’s home religion to a focus on the universally available Real is, he famously says, a Copernican “revolution” in religious thought. Hick says that those religious adherents who abandon the traditional positions of exclusivism or inclusivism, positions that recognize but one religious path as valid, and move to a pluralism in which many paths are equally efficacious, are “crossing the Rubicon” (Hick and Knitter 1987: viii) and this is also a revolutionary slogan. In the light of this language of revolution, most of the critics of Hick’s pluralism might be labeled “reactionary.” They reject the view that religions can be equally valid paths. They resist the pluralist project and continue to defend some form of exclusivism or inclusivism. Thus the lines are typically drawn in philosophy of religion between conservatives and progressives. Largely unappreciated, however, is a set of recent critics of Hick’s pluralism who argue for what I take to be an authentically new position in philosophy of religion, namely, the position that the real problem with Hick’s revolution is not that it is pluralistic, but that it is not pluralistic enough. What they call for is “more pluralism,” or a “fuller and more genuine pluralism.” The more pluralistic position that they are calling for, however, once its implications are clearly seen, undermines the traditional distinctions between conservative and progressive, and for this reason I argue that the position to which they point holds promise for the future of philosophy of religions.

From the perspective of these more pluralistic critics, the central inadequacy of Hick’s revolution is that it treats different religions as responses to the same ultimate reality. A more genuine pluralism, they argue, will not burden philosophy of religion with the assumption that what the theist experiences as that which forgives will be the same as what the Buddhist experiences in satori, and neither is assumed to be the same as what the Hindu describes as moksha. Instead, these new pluralists seek a position that sees different religions as recommending different ways of life based on different religious experiences and different understandings of what is ultimate. In other words, the position they seek would be soteriologically and ontologically pluralist. Religions are, as one proponent of this position puts it, “different paths to different summits.”

Following Kate McCarthy, I will call such proposals “nonconvergent pluralisms” (McCarthy 2000: esp. 92-4). “Convergent pluralisms,” like Hick’s, understand the differences among religious truth claims as different responses to the single divine reality; in “nonconvergent pluralisms,” ultimate reality itself is conceived pluralistically. Using these labels, then, my aim in this paper is to argue that a nonconvergent pluralism in philosophy of religion preserves what is most valuable in Hick’s convergent pluralism, namely, the possibility that more than one religious path may be valid, while overcoming the aspects of that proposal that are the most problematic, namely, first, that it denies that any religion is unique, superior, or final; second, that it undermines the value for members of one tradition of investigating a religion other than one’s own; and especially, third, that it rejects the possibility of metaphysics on what I take to be incoherent, Kantian grounds.

II. Soteriological Pluralism

As I understand it, a nonconvergent pluralism has two sides. The first side might be called “soteriological pluralism,” the view that religious paths pursue different ends, ends that need not converge. For example, the Hindu goal of union with Brahman, the Buddhist goal of
cessation of self, and the Christian goal of communion with the Trinity are, on this approach, divergent goals. They cannot be reduced to each other; they do not amount to “the same thing.” The second side, which might be called “ontological pluralism,” is to find a way in which metaphysical understandings of reality may diverge and yet still be valid; this subject will be taken up in the section III of this paper.

The clearest and most powerful call for soteriological pluralism I know can be found in Mark Heim’s book *Salvations* (Heim 1995; see also DiNoia, Gall). Heim has been involved in interreligious dialogue, and from that context he complains that Hick’s form of pluralism undermines the motivation one might have to investigate the particulars of the other faith traditions (e.g., 3, 123). Precisely because Hick assumes that there can be but one soteriological end (“salvation/liberation”) which is to transform oneself so as to be in right relation with the one metaphysical ultimate (“the Real”), Hick’s pluralism is forced to abstract from religions a generic core, treating the historical and metaphysical beliefs that make these traditions distinctive as if they are not soteriologically significant. Hick’s pluralism is therefore, Heim says, “real but superficial” (1995: 7; for Hick’s response, see Hick 1995: 106-8). A “true religious pluralism,” by contrast, will permit religions to teach the means to reach different ends. Heim has a helpful analogy in which he compares religions to voyages. Different voyages offer different itineraries, different maps, and each one sends the traveler in a different direction. “Jaffna is a place I will never arrive at inadvertently at the same time I get to London. I regard information about it as highly relevant regarding possibilities and experiences that I will never actualize unless I strike out in that direction and which others can actualize whether I strike out or not” (1995: 220). On a convergent pluralism like Hick’s, the goal of each trip is the generic one of “reaching the destination,” and the implication is that “[i]f you have time only for one of these trips, you haven’t missed much” (1995: 220). Given a nonconvergent approach, religions can be valid even though their ends turn out to differ. Such an approach would therefore permit one to recognize the distinctive and “saving” truth in other religions even while it permits one legitimately to witness to the uniqueness and superiority of one’s own.

The most significant philosophical difference between a convergent pluralism and a nonconvergent one concerns the way that each conceives of the relation between the religious paths and their fulfillments. On a convergent approach, religions can differ in the ways in which they conceptualize the goal of their respective paths, but the different conceptualizations they employ cannot characterize the ultimate reality to which they all point. Thus Hick, for example, works with an epistemological dualism in which the goals of religious paths are phenomenologically different but noumenally the same. Ultimate reality for Hick transcends religious concepts. A nonconvergent approach rejects this dualism and does not separate the conception of the path from that of the goal. Heim, for example, argues that a religious end is actually constituted in part by the concepts and the practices used to achieve it (e.g., 151, 162, 163). Religious beliefs and practices are therefore not merely propadeutic to the salvation to which they point, but rather integral to it. Heim provides another useful metaphor, comparing a religious path to a form of training or discipline. To say that the religious practices and concepts that make up the path are not soteriologically significant would be like saying that the differences in study among various trade, professional, and graduate schools are not “vocationally significant” (27). Thus, analogously to way that a medical school shapes doctors, a religion shapes its members. “Religious ends are not extrinsic awards granted for unrelated performances, like trips to Hawaii won in lotteries. No one is unhappy ‘in’ nirvana or arrives at it unready, because the state of cessation is an achievement the path makes possible. It is not ‘enjoyed’ until one has become what the path makes you. The way and the end are one” (162).
A nonconvergent pluralistic philosophy of religion therefore sees different religious ends like union with Brahman, communion with the Trinity, and the cessation of self as different states. Heim, however, does not develop a metaphysical account of how such different religious ends might coexist. In fact, Heim sometimes seems unfortunately to be thinking in terms of his travel metaphor, as if different religious ends are in different “places” or one might go first to Nirvana and then later to heaven (1995: 149). He does recognize that “[i]f these varied religious aims are actualized, the universe must be such as to support these alternative human fulfillments” (215). But Heim does not put his money down for a single model of how this might be possible. “In philosophical terms the options are open. There could be many ineffable reals, and only one of them truly ultimate in the sense of excluding or being the ground of the others. There could be in fact only one actual ineffable real, subsisting equally in the fulfillment of the various religious aims and equally described or not described by the various traditions. Or there could by many coexistent ineffable reals, none of them truly ultimate” (153; cf. 146-9). I conclude, then, that Heim is persuasive that philosophers of religion should endorse a soteriological pluralism, but he merely indicates the need to think about ontological pluralism.

III. Ontological Pluralism: Three Approaches

There remains what seems to many to be a central and insuperable obstacle for the plausibility of a nonconvergent view such as the one I am recommending here, and it is this. Religions typically seem to identify their paths by making metaphysical claims about the nature of ultimate reality. In other words, religious communities and their representative intellectuals typically seem to understand their religious beliefs and practices realistically, as making or implying claims about the way things really are. If this is so, then it is difficult to see how different understandings of reality can be true. It is difficult to see, for example, how the Hindu might be right that Brahman is the ultimate reality, the Buddhist might also be right that emptiness is the ultimate reality, and the Christian might also be right that the God of the Bible is the ultimate reality.

Ontological pluralism seeks to circumvent this difficulty by rejecting the assumption that different religious communities are experiencing or speaking about the same ontological reality. In brief, the idea of ontological pluralism is simple: it is the idea that the whole of reality is complicated — so complicated in fact that it is possible that more than one religious understanding of the nature of things may be valid. If more than one can be valid, moreover, then the variety of religious metaphysical claims may be not rivals, but rather complements to each other.

To make ontological pluralism plausible, some way of conceiving this ontological variety needs to be worked out, and many consider this difficult or impossible. There are (so far as I know) three attempts to develop a metaphysical approach that would make sense of a pluralism of religious ends. One is the nondualist “cosmotheandric” approach of Raimundo Panikkar, the second is the holographic model of Stephen Kaplan, and the third is the Whiteheadian model of John Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin. I will consider each in turn.

Raimundo Panikkar holds that a religious path is typically based on a distinctive experience of the nature of things, “a primordial apprehension of reality” (1984: 99). “In a word, there is a constitutive link between a certain conception of reality, which can be expressed intelligibly, and the religion which espouses it” (1984: 98). The conceptions of reality proffered by different religions often cannot be reconciled because they contradict each other, Panikkar insists, but he proposes that it is the mark of a genuinely pluralistic philosophy of religions to accept them anyway. “We have a situation of [genuine] pluralism only when we are confronted with mutually exclusive and respectively contradictory systems” (1987: 125). “Religious
pluralism recognizes the authenticity, validity, and truth of different religions once their mutual incompatibility has been established on solid rational grounds” (1984: 101).

Panikkar thus takes a nonconvergent approach to religious ontologies. His approach is all the more distinctive in that he also seeks to call into question “the thirst for universality,” a thirst which leads one to try to reduce the variety of religious conceptions of reality to a single perspective, an effort which he sees as particularly Western (1987: 121, 119). He challenges the idea that there can be a single over-arching model that might synthesize all the different religious understandings of reality. The very idea of such a thing he considers noble but misguided, and it is not true pluralism. As he often says, genuine pluralism is incompatible with a rational picture of the whole. “Pluralism is not a supersystem. It accepts the fact that the human condition does not possess an all-encompassing view of reality” (1984: 100; cf. 1987: 128). Panikkar therefore rejects the “intellectual colonialism” (1987: 124, 136) of any monistic answer to religious diversity. According to him, “pluralism entails: the dethronement of reason and the abandonment of the monotheistic [i.e., single truth] paradigm” (125). In short, Panikkar challenges the idea that a genuine pluralism can be thought.

At times, however, Panikkar comes very close to offering his own pluralistic metaphysics. In fact, one might say that a metaphysical vision is implied by much of what Panikkar writes, for when he critiques those who say that the ultimate nature of things is simple, he implies that it is complex; when he says critiques those who say it is absolute, he implies that it is relative. These appear to be claims about the character of reality as such. And Panikkar goes much further and develops his own rich vision of reality as having three aspects, what he calls “the cosmotheandric principle.”

The cosmotheandric principle could be stated by saying that the divine, the human and the earthly -- however we may prefer to call them -- are the three irreducible dimensions which constitute the real, i.e., any reality inasmuch as it is real… What this intuition emphasizes is that the three dimensions of reality are neither three modes of a monolithic undifferentiated reality, nor are they three elements of a pluralistic system. There is rather one, though intrinsically threefold, relation which expresses the ultimate constitution of reality. Everything that exists, any real being, presents this triune constitution expressed in three dimensions. I am not only saying that everything is directly or indirectly related to everything else: the radical relativity or pratityasamutpada of the Buddhist tradition. I am also stressing that this relationship is not only constitutive of the whole, but that it flashes forth, ever new and vital, in every spark of the real” (1993: 74 [60?]).

Panikkar sees this interpenetration of the cosmic, the divine, and the human expressed in different ways in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and it is an invariant of all religions and cultures. Panikkar thus does have a vision of reality. In the end, however, he holds that any all-inclusive model (including his own) necessarily falls short, because human thought cannot capture reality. The nature of reality transcends logic, and so it “transcends not only our thinking but thinking as such” (1984: 114-5).

If ontological pluralism cannot be coherently thought, however, Panikkar suggests that it can be felt. For Panikkar, the alternative to a rational account that subsumes the diversity of religions in a nonpluralistic picture is a kind of cosmic confidence or trust that remains open to diversity. If one countenances an unreconciled diversity of religious voices, a plurality that is not a pluralism, one may end up with a “discordant concord” (1987: 147), a harmony that is only
possible by permitting differences. “Music here is the paradigm. There is no harmonious accord if there is no diversity of sounds, or if those sounds coalesce in one single note” (1987: 145). In a sophisticated comment, Panikkar writes, “We may yet want to eliminate cacophonies. But this again depends very much on the education and the generosity of our ears” (1987: 147).

In sum, Panikkar’s proposals are quite suggestive. Their usefulness for philosophy of religion, however, will be undermined for many by his appeals to mystery and paradox. To be sure, philosophers who seek to describe the character of the totality of reality should agree with Panikkar that their ideas are necessarily partial and unavoidably fallible. But one cannot coherently think with an understanding of pluralism that cannot be thought. Nevertheless, Panikkar takes with full seriousness the difficulty of coming to terms with religious traditions in their uniqueness, and his approach will continue to appeal to those who are convinced that the best approach to religious diversity is an attitude of trust in reality that is deeper than intellec
tion.

A second example of ontological pluralism comes from Stephen Kaplan, who argues, contra Panikkar, that if one is careful, one can develop a model that respects the validity of multiple religious ontologies. His proposal is that the unusual character of holography provides a way to imagine reality itself as having a multiple character. A holographic situation, Kaplan explains, has two “domains”: an “implicate domain” (that is, the holographic film itself, coded with interference patterns from a laser), and an “explicate domain” (that is, the three-dimensional objects projected from the film). Kaplan then argues, first, that since a holographic film (unlike a photographic film) does not contain images, and since from any part of the film one can produce a complete holographic object, the implicate domain suggests a nondualistic understanding of reality in which every part contains the whole -- like that of Advaita Vedānta. Kaplan then argues, second, that if one understands the implicate domain, not as a static pattern on a film, but rather as the dynamic flow of interference patterns, then it suggests an understanding of reality as a web of interrelationships in process -- like that of Yogācāra Buddhism. And third, if one were to encode two separate images in the implicate domain of a single holographic film (for example, with two lasers), then this scenario provides a way to imagine a theistic position. For if one takes one image as God and the other as the world, then the two images would be enfolded on a single film, which suggests God’s immanence, but when the two images are projected, the two images would exist in distinct explicate spaces, which suggests God’s transcendence.

Kaplan’s proposal is to use the holographic situation as a metaphysical model, a model of reality as such. If one imagines that the implicate order (the holographic film) is coextensive with the totality of existence, and that the explicate domain (the objects encoded on the film) is as well, then the two mutually interpenetrate and each is coextensive with reality as such. In this way, the holograph provides an all-inclusive understanding of what exists, an understanding that does not preclude but rather enables the possibility that reality might be interpreted in different ways.

The holographic model is thought-provoking and original, but as far as I can judge, it has the weakness that the three features of the holographic situation only resemble the three religious accounts of reality in partial ways. For example, Kaplan claims that in a holograph’s implicate domain, just as in Advaita Vedānta, subject-object dualism is overcome. Kaplan explains that if one has a photograph of two people, one person may be on the left and the other on the right. But in the implicate domain of a holograph, there are no images and in this sense the dualism between them is not present (9). Now, this may be object-object dualism, but it is not subject-object dualism, which typically refers to the difference between a knowing subject and the objects of her consciousness. This is a dualistic epistemic state that is not overcome in a holograph, and it is hard to conceive how it could be. Similarly, it is not clear how one can take the interference
patterns, which code an image onto the holographic film “once and for all,” as a dynamic, temporal process in the Yogācāra sense. Lacking a temporal dimension, they do not seem like “constantly flowing wave formations converging with other wave formations” (138), except in the merely metaphorical sense in which one might say that the words on this page are. And a “double” holograph like the one Kaplan describes, in which an image representing God overlaps with another image representing the world, may suggest the notion of interpenetrating dimensions of reality, but it cannot suggest their interaction.

Of course, no model is perfect, and Kaplan’s model has the strength of suggesting -- far better than some traditional models, like that of a wheel, for example -- that it is possible to conceive of reality in general in such a way that multiple conceptions of it might be equally valid. Kaplan also provides a clear discussion of the relation between religious teachings about ultimate reality and his own metaphysical proposal as a comparative philosopher. Although “ultimate reality” and “metaphysics” are often treated as equivalent, Kaplan distinguishes them, treating ultimate reality as referring to an ontological structure or nature that is ultimate in the soteriological sense and metaphysics as one’s theory of all reality and therefore as the more inclusive term. Given this distinction, “there may be more than one type of ontological structure or nature within the one metaphysical system and therefore, more than one ultimate reality” (24, n. 6; cf. 54). Such a distinction, I judge, will need to be adopted by any who try to improve on his proposal.

I turn now to the Whiteheadian approach developed by John Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, which I take to be the most promising of these three approaches. They too hold that there are three ultimates, and so there are three general types of religious belief and experience that may be valid. How do they make their case?

Whiteheadians reject the idea of creation from nothing, “holding instead with Plato and the Hebrew Bible that our world was created out of a chaotic situation” (Griffin 2001: 26). On a Whiteheadian account, a Supreme Being exists necessarily and could not fail to exist. But given the rejection of a beginning of reality, the same can be said of that of which the world is made; call this Being Itself. Many philosophers understand Being Itself as a kind of formless matter, as Substance; Whitehead understood it as a process, as Creativity. On either understanding, however, given its lack of a beginning, Being Itself exists always and everywhere; it is that which is instantiated by each concrete entity, a feature common to everything that is actual. Being Itself is therefore a necessary feature of any world, something without which nothing is, and, in this sense, it is another ultimate. On this account, then, the Supreme Being and Being Itself are not identical, but both exist necessarily, as part of the nature of things. They are two ultimate realities. But on this model there is also a third ultimate. Being Itself is by definition formless and unconditioned. Being Itself is not itself an entity, and so it never exists purely as such. Instead, it always or only exists as that of which the totality of actual things is made. The formless exists always or only as it is informed in some particular way or another. It exists “in” any given set of actual entities. If this is right, then it follows that though no given created entities exists necessarily, some created entity or other must always exist. If one uses the label of “the Cosmos” for whatever world or universe exists, then the Cosmos must always exist. In this sense the Cosmos is a third ultimate reality.

In short, then, the Whiteheadian approach recognizes the possibility of three ultimates. I have been calling them the Supreme Being, Being itself, and the Cosmos; Whitehead calls them God, Creativity, and the World. It is crucial to emphasize, however, that the ontological status of the three is quite different. The World or the Cosmos is a collective noun, referring to the set of whatever nondivine actualities there are, each of which exists contingently. God is an actual
being, a creative agent, but unlike every other actuality, God exists under all conditions (that is, necessarily). Being Itself or Creativity might also be said to be a “power,” but it is a power that does not exist apart from the actual beings in the Cosmos. Unlike God, then, Being Itself or Creativity is not an actuality but rather an abstraction from the character of all things. As Griffin puts it, Creativity is not an agent but “agency as such.” In order to highlight this ontological difference, Griffin suggests calling God “the actual ultimate reality” and calling Creativity “the nonactual ultimate reality,” or calling God “the personal ultimate reality” and calling creativity “the impersonal ultimate reality” (2001: 268-9). Griffin stresses that different ultimates are not multiple Gods: “creativity is not an actuality, not a being, not an agent, but simply the activity involved in all agential beings, so it would make no sense to think of it as a deity” (2001: 269). In fact, because their ontological status is so different, Cobb does not speak of a plurality of ultimate realities, fearing that this term suggests three actual beings (1999:122).

Given the model, then, Cobb and Griffin make the case that differing religious accounts of what is ultimate may be complementary rather than opposed. This model thus provides an understanding of reality that is multifaceted enough to permit three basic kinds of religious experience. Borrowing labels from John Hutchison (1981), Cobb distinguishes “theistic” types that focus on the Supreme Being and which pursue salvation, “acosmic” types that focus on Being Itself and which pursue liberation, and “cosmic” religions that focus on the Cosmos itself or some of its aspects. Such a model permits the possibility that three different types of alleged experiences might be veridical. The existence of a personal ultimate accounts for experiences of a presence understood as a Person or Spirit, experiences of providence and grace, experiences of being loved or forgiven, experiences of peace or joy as a gift. The existence of an impersonal ultimate accounts for experiences of oceanic feelings, of codependent arising, and of the Way felt as a creative power. And the existence of the Cosmos as an ultimate accounts for experiences of the sacredness of the earth, of communion with natural forces personified, of attentiveness to “Suchness,” and of a harmony with “all things.”

This model for a pluralistic metaphysics is complex, but the tripartite reality it seeks to imagine is straightforward. Reality on their model might helpfully be compared to an art class. Some of the students are drawn to and orient themselves to the creativity that the class encourages, a creativity that is not itself an independent agent but which pervades the class and can be found and cultivated within oneself. Other students, however, orient themselves to the teacher as the highest exemplification of creativity. Without denying that there is creativity in the abstract, they seek to be taught by the master. Still other students are simply in love with being there, in that very place, with exactly those others. This would be appreciation not of the teacher nor of the pervasive creativity, but of the actual and particular conditions in which the creativity and the teaching happen.

In my judgment, the idea of three ultimates gives the Whiteheadian model an enormous amount of analytic power. It lets one take apparently rival claims about ultimate reality, both between and within religious traditions, and to disentangle them according to that to which they seek to refer. From this perspective, one can say that those who identify the ultimate as a supreme Being — naming it as Allah, Ishvara, Yahweh, Amida, etc. — share a common basic orientation that struggles to name something real. This model lets one say that those who identify the ultimate differently, as Being Itself — conceiving it as Dharmakaya, Brahman, Godhead, or the Dao — share a different orientation without denying that they may be related to what there is. And those who identify the ultimate as the Cosmos itself — a type of religion that has been almost completely ignored by philosophers of religion — also struggle to relate themselves to an ultimate. Given the Whiteheadian model, debate within one of these categories may help its members to purify their conceptions; debate between them may lead to their enrichment.
IV. Hick’s Response

It may be valuable now to compare nonconvergent pluralism to Hick’s convergent pluralism. Some may assume that Hick’s Kantian approach to religious diversity is, in principle, open to the idea that ultimate reality could be many. After all, the Real is a noumenal reality and so, strictly speaking, Hick is barred from claiming that it is single.' And it is true that he often says that the Real may be one or many (e.g., 1989: 246, 350; 1995: 27). Nevertheless, his Kantianism notwithstanding, Hick regularly defends the idea that different world faiths are different responses to “the same reality” (e.g., 1995: 32), and now that the idea of a nonconvergent pluralism has been raised, he explicitly rejects it (1995: 60). Hick thinks that the Real is not plural. What are his reasons?

In his Gifford lectures, Hick rejects the idea that the Real is many on the grounds that a single ultimate is “the simplest hypothesis” (Hick 1989: 248-9). His point, briefly, is that one does not need to posit many ultimates if one ultimate, divergently experienced, can account for the many religions by itself. But this claim that the different religions are pointing to the same reality is problematic in at least two ways. First, it requires one to treat religious metaphysical claims as nonmetaphysical or “local” claims, which contradicts the self-understandings of the religions Hick claims to be interpreting. Second, it requires one to posit a noumenal reality that at the same time both cannot be experienced and is variously experienced. As Griffin says, although simplicity should always be a desideratum, adequacy to the facts in question, along with self-consistency, should always be given greater weight” (2001: 277; cf. Kaplan 38-9). In The Rainbow of Faiths (1995), however, Hick gives a different reason for rejecting ontological pluralism. “My reason to assume that the different world religions are referring, through their specific concepts of the God and Absolutes, to the same ultimate Reality is the striking similarity of the transformed human state described within the different traditions as saved, redeemed, enlightened, wise, awakened, liberated” (1995: 69). In my judgment, Hick is right about the common presence in different religions of teachings of love and compassion (1995: 77-8). But there also seem to be equally clear differences between the dispositions cultivated in what Weber calls world-affirming and world-denying religions, or for that matter between the fervent devotion and nonattached equanimity. As Heim says succinctly, Christian saints make bad Buddhists (162, quoting Edward Conze; cf. DiNoia 258-62). So I conclude that Hick’s rejection of ontological pluralism reflects his focus on the generic aspects of religion rather than the particulars, but it does not reveal any conceptual problem with focusing on the particular, nor with ontological pluralism as a program for philosophy of religion.

Hick also offers a critique, specifically, of the Whiteheadian model for ontological pluralism, which he knows only in the form in which Griffin (2001: ch. 7) defends it, namely, with God and Creativity as complementary ultimate realities. Hick’s objection is that the idea of two ultimates is hardly less restrictive than a one-ultimate exclusivism. As Hick puts it, this model simply combines “a single finite generic God together with just one of the non-personal absolutes. But this would be a selective, and indeed arbitrarily selective, theory which it would be very hard to justify” (1995: 70). To be sure, Griffin’s model is intended not to elevate two particular religions, but two widespread types of religious conception and experience, and so it may be attractive to a broad spectrum of religious philosophies. Nevertheless, Hick is completely right that, unlike Hick’s own categories of the personae and impersonae of the Real, the Whiteheadian personal and nonpersonal ultimates are not generic. Griffin and Cobb are recommending a particular conception of God and a particular conception of the nonpersonal ultimate. Unlike Hick’s pluralism, therefore, this nonconvergent approach is not intended to provide a way to say that all religious understandings of the ultimate are equally valid or on a par
with regard to truth. Of course, Cobb and Griffin would deny that this is “arbitrarily selective.” Rather, they would argue that, given a Whiteheadian analysis of relations, creativity, time, power, and so on, the process understanding of God (which is not a “finite” God but one without a monopoly of power) makes the most sense of the personal ultimate reality, and the process understanding of Creativity makes the most sense of the impersonal ultimate reality. But here is the crux: if the Whiteheadian analysis is right, then nonWhiteheadian understandings of these ultimates will be to a greater or lesser extent mistaken. This signals what is perhaps the most important difference between these two forms of pluralism. If we define “pluralism” with regard to truth as the view that religions can make claims about ultimate reality that are both contrary and true, and “inclusivism” as the view that some religions are truer than others, then Cobb and Griffin are both pluralists and inclusivists. In other words, the nonconvergent pluralistic philosophy of religions – what I have been calling in this paper the “next pluralism” – undermines the traditional typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. I consider this to be one of its greatest benefits and so I turn to it now.

V. Ontological Pluralism: The Very Idea

Each of these particular approaches to ontological pluralism no doubt raises its own particular set of questions that deserve attention, but more basic are general objections, objections to the very idea of a plurality of ultimates. In closing, I will consider the three that seem to me the most serious.

The first objection to the very idea of nonconvergent pluralism is that it seems at least counter-intuitive to speak of more than one reality being “ultimate.” Part of the meaning of the word “ultimate,” like the meaning of “best,” it seems, is that there can be only one. Even my computer, no doubt trying to helpful, keeps underlining the plural word “ultimates” as a grammatical error. But consider the ways in which the word ultimate is used. First, a religious community might claim that some reality is soteriologically ultimate, in the sense that it really is that which saves or liberates; it must really be that which makes one’s religious end possible. The nonconvergent pluralists do not deny that what a religion holds as ultimate really may be ultimate in this sense. Kaplan is especially clear on this point as he makes that case that, from the perspective of some soteriological framework, the purported reality really is ultimate, “because it provides an ultimate solution to existence” (Kaplan 42). Second, a religious community might claim that some reality is metaphysically ultimate, in the sense that it exists necessarily, as part of the nature of things; it must be some reality without which nothing is. The nonconvergent pluralists also do not deny that what a religion holds as ultimate really may be ultimate in this sense. The only thing that nonconvergent pluralism denies is that the metaphysical ultimate is simple. The nonconvergent models of reality are, by definition, multifaceted. They therefore do permit the particular religions to refer to a reality that is ultimate in both the soteriological and the metaphysical senses. The change they require is that the particular religions not claim that their own understanding of ultimate reality is the only permissible account or, alternatively, they require that the particular religions not deny that what other traditions affirm might also prove to be the case.

Here is a second objection to the very idea of a pluralistic metaphysics. It seems that “everyone must stand somewhere,” and so there can be no such thing as a religiously neutral metaphysical account of the nature of things. If this is true, then any metaphysical model of the nature of things will be either the religious metaphysics of some particular religion, or a new, rival religious perspective. And since no religions (or almost no religions) teach nonconvergent pluralism, it may seem that the very idea of a nonconvergent pluralism creates a new, rival religious perspective. But, in response, though nonconvergent pluralists do offer metaphysical
models of reality, and these models are meant to be more inclusive than other models, it is not completely accurate to say that these models are rivals to traditional perspectives. They are not rivals for the simple reason that they do not propose any new religious ultimates. For example, on the Whiteheadian view, God is in fact the ultimate reality for theists, and though God’s existence does not exclude the possibility of other features of reality being ultimate, God is not therefore replaced in theistic prayer or worship by a new, “triple” religious ultimate, say, God-Creativity-World. A Whiteheadian pluralistic metaphysics gathers together particular views of what is ultimate, but it does not offer a rival religious object to those particular views (cf. Kaplan 46).

The third objection to the very idea of nonconvergent pluralism is that the project itself seems to assume that religions (or least the most popular ones) are true and that the only philosophical question is: how? It seems to begin from the premise that the philosopher of religion knows that different religions are true, or at least that she wants to “respect” them, and so the philosophical task is to develop a model that is complex enough to credit their variant accounts. The objection is that to assume that religions are true is an inappropriate assumption for philosophy. It turns philosophers of religion from critics into caretakers, to use Russell McCutcheon’s words (2001). This objection I agree with. Philosophy of religions should not build into its presuppositions the a priori view that many religions are true. The way to avoid this is by modalizing the philosophy of religions.13 This is to say that philosophers of religion should work not with the assumption that “many religions are true” but rather “it is possible that more than one religion is true.” They could be true or they could be false, and one needs to look at the particular claims each makes before assessing them. If this is the working hypothesis of nonconvergent pluralism, then it is a hypothesis that even an atheist philosopher might entertain.

To be sure, the primary benefit of nonconvergent pluralism is that it does not assume that, at most, one religion is true. It thereby opens the possibility of doing philosophy of religion without the assumption that the teachings of different religious traditions are necessarily rivals seeking to address the same question and never allies seeking to address complementary questions. Nevertheless, nonconvergent pluralism (at least in the model-developing versions represented by Kaplan, Cobb and Griffin) is not an acritical or relativistic approach. Since it itself takes a metaphysical position, it therefore requires the critique of religious teachings that conflict with it. Those who argue for an ontologically pluralist model, in other words, might be called “epistemically inclusivist,” in the sense that they promote one particular model as the best account of the nature of things, and they reject the claims that are incompatible with that model as to that extent misguided.

I can illustrate the potential for philosophical critique of religions from a nonconvergent perspective with the Whiteheadian model. Cobb, for instance, does have a “starting point in credulity” (1999: 120), based on his view that a tradition that has lasted centuries or millennia is unlikely to be completely out of touch with reality. “Only as a last resort should we come to the conclusion that a great tradition is fundamentally deluded” (1999: 120). Nevertheless, he does not assume that “all religions are true.” On the contrary, Cobb critiques religions, first, when they assume that if their metaphysical claims are true, then different metaphysical claims must be false. This is to say that as a nonconvergent pluralist he (inevitably) critiques religious claims that contradict nonconvergent pluralism. Cobb also insists, second, that even if religious claims about the three ultimates are complementary and are not in conflict, there will still be conflict about how best to understand each kind of ultimate and, at this level, critique must still occur. As Cobb says, “one must reject many doctrines of God since they contradict each other,” and the same can be said for rival understandings of Creativity and the Cosmos (1999: 121; emphasis in the original).14 And third, Cobb recognizes that it is possible that a religious tradition is
fundamentally deluded, that its understanding of ultimate reality may be so confused that the philosopher will conclude that it is not coherent. As Cobb admits, one should come to this conclusion only as a last resort, but “it may be the case” (1999: 120; emphasis in the original).

In these three ways, then, a nonconvergent pluralist proposes a model of reality as such and assesses religious claims as more or less in accord with it. In regard to truth, then, nonconvergent pluralism is therefore not pluralist.

If these three general objections can be surmounted, then I conclude that the very idea of a nonconvergent pluralism deserves greater attention, for it has the potential to advance the philosophical study of religious diversity in two important ways.

First, nonconvergent pluralism, unlike convergent pluralism, encourages what might be called an a posteriori, exploratory attitude to religions. The difference between them is not only that nonconvergent pluralism does not agree that many religions are of roughly equal value or validity. The primary difference is that nonconvergent pluralism does not assume that what any two religions teach about the proper end of human existence or what they identify as the most important aspect of reality will be the same. One needs always to look and see. In this sense, nonconvergent pluralism embodies a postmodern or nonessentialist approach. Cobb is the most explicit on this point (see especially 1999: 42-3, 62-5). A nonconvergent philosophy of religions does not begin from an assumption about what religions have in common or for what distinguishes essentially religious from essentially nonreligious phenomena. Instead of assuming that each particular religion teaches essentially the same goal as others (simply because it is a religion), this approach requires that one attend to the teachings of each religion, however distinctive they are. It thus encourages the a posteriori part of philosophy of religions.

Second, as I suggested at the beginning of this paper, nonconvergent pluralism reconfigures — and to a certain extent, undermines — the usual typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Those three positions have generally assumed that there is but one true religious end; they have disagreed on whether and how the members of “other” religions can reach it. But if one grants, with nonconvergent pluralism, that religions pursue different ends, then this disagreement is largely rendered uninteresting. An exclusivist who argues that keeping the Torah does not lead to union with Brahman or that one cannot reach Nirvana by accepting the gift of God’s grace, like the person who says that one cannot become a sumo wrestler by ballet dancing, is correct, but trivially so. The recognition of possibly valid different ends transforms the discussion.

For this reason, then, this paper has important implications for those whom I labeled at the beginning of this paper “reactionary.” The reactionary response, recall, maintains against Hick’s pluralism that one religion is uniquely superior. Clearly, one of the central implications of this paper is that if Hick’s version of pluralism is found to be unsatisfactory, this does not invalidate the pluralist position as such. The pluralist “revolution,” if one wants to call it that, includes other, stronger positions and those who take a reactionary position should attend to these alternative versions. (Similarly, if one agrees with Hick in rejecting the view that only one religion can be true, it does not follow that one must adopt Hick’s version of pluralism.) But here is a more important implication and my main point. If a nonconvergent pluralism is coherent, then to that extent the reactionary response is not only weakened; it is otiose. From the perspective of nonconvergent pluralism, more than one religion may make true claims about the ultimate and how to live in accord with it. Each will be unique and may be, on its own terms, uniquely superior. This is because this form of pluralism does not imply that all religions are on a par with regard to truth. On the contrary, since religions teach divergent paths, the question whether any one of them is true turns on its merits. As Heim says, “Once the boundaries of the
narrow typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism are burst, there is room for a more exciting discussion in which the encounter between faiths will recover an expectant attentiveness to their particulars” (Heim 226).  

**Endnotes**

1 These two terms still lack definitive senses, however, and so one can find opposed philosophers of religion meaning the same thing by them, namely, that only one religion is fully valid, through others may be partially so, and that where other religions make rival claims they must be wrong. This self-understanding is shared for example by Plantinga’s exclusivism and Griffiths’ inclusivism.

2 In the clearest analysis of the types of pluralism to date, David Ray Griffin uses the labels “identist pluralism” and “pluralist pluralism,” distinguishing both from “generic religious pluralism” (Griffin forthcoming). Keith Ward (1990) also discussed types of pluralism but did not yet see the possibility of nonconvergent pluralism; Anselm K. Min (1997) recognized Raimundo Panikkar as an illustration of what he calls “ontological pluralism” but did not define the type.

3 DiNoia makes this same point: “it is clear that both pluralist and inclusivist positions fail to account for the inextricable connection between the particular aims of life commended by religious communities and the specific sets of dispositions they foster to promote the attainment and enjoyment of those aims. Thus, in different ways, both inclusivism and pluralism tend to divorce what in most religious traditions are understood as inseparable” (257). And opposing what he calls an “inherent nominalist attitude” in Hick, Panikkar agrees: “the paths belong also to the goal” (1984: 104).

4 Heim proposes what he calls “orientational pluralism,” a position he adopts from Nicholas Rescher. On this view, there is a diversity of perspectives on the one common reality, but only one position is rationally appropriate from a given perspective. Thus rival views are not equally valid, even if they are tenable from their given perspectives.

5 Hick, for example, mocks the idea that different religions can be right in their metaphysical beliefs, saying, “The problem with this picture is the difficulty of spelling out the relationship between these different realities. I suppose it’s possible to think that Allah presides over Muslim countries, the Holy Trinity over Christian countries, Vishnu and Shiva over different parts of India, Adonai over Israel—but what about the still occupied territories? – and so on. But could one really make sense of this kind of polytheism, particularly today when people of different faiths are mixed up together in so many areas?” (1995: 70). Thankfully, this caricature does not do justice to the proposals of the philosophers considered here.

6 Several philosophers have pointed out self-referential problems involved in arguing for a position that involves “the dethronement of reason.” For example, Gerald Larson argues that Panikkar rejects two-valued logic, a move which is not incoherent, but then Panikkar cannot consistently also assert his own position as true (Larson 1990). Thomas Dean gives an opposite interpretation, arguing that Panikkar’s position does not really dethrone reason as he claims, for it is implicitly committed to a certain understanding of reason (namely, Gadamer’s) (Dean 1987).
I am reminded of a picture by M. C. Escher entitled “Three Worlds” that shows a fish underwater, with leaves floating on the surface of the water, and a reflection of the trees above. One might say that Escher shows us how there can be three worlds “in one,” but the relations between them are merely external, and are not creative, let alone loving, in the sense important to theists.

At one point, Heim claims that the Whiteheadian position (which he knows only from Cobb, and then only from the one essay, “Beyond ‘Pluralism’” [Cobb 1990]) is like his own. He says: Cobb’s position “seems very much in line with what orientational pluralism would imply in the religious area” (144). Heim is right that both approaches would permit religious traditions to hold their convictions that they are unique and that their beliefs are universally valid. But Cobb and Griffin would not welcome Heim’s position that the differences between religions are irreducible. In this respect, the Whiteheadian position resembles more Rescher’s third position in which reality is multifaceted (Heim 133-4).

Griffin claims that there are precedents for this syncretic view in attempts by some Eastern thinkers to reconcile theism and nontheism, and he points to studies of the conciliatory positions of the Hindu Ramanuja and Aurobindo and of the Buddhist Shinran and the Lotus Sutra (2001: 278-81). Huston Smith claims that Sri Ramakrishna also holds a two ultimates view (Smith 1991: 62; cf. the two metaphors on 63).

Many have complained that Hick violates his own principles in order to speak about the Real. See, for example, Harris 2002.

As Keith Yandell (1993: 199) points out, one sometimes finds Hick claiming both of these in the same paragraph (Hick 1989: 249).

Hick for one makes this argument, that “what the traditions regard severally as ultimates are different and therefore cannot all be truly ultimate. … there cannot be a plurality of ultimates” (Hick 1989: 248-9). And Kaplan admits, “It seems axiomatic that ultimate is unique and therefore there cannot be two or more ultimates” (Kaplan 39; emphasis added).

Ogden (1992) shows how Hick and others have failed to do this; Griffiths (1993) highlights the importance of the modal distinction.

For instance, Cobb has trenchant critiques of Masao Abe’s Zen Buddhism (1990b).

Cobb, a thorough-going fallibilist, would also admit that his formulation of the three ultimates may be wrong. Since nonconvergent pluralists have disagreed about whether and how to develop a metaphysical model, as I showed in section III, a philosopher of religion that takes one of these models as her working hypothesis may judge that it is the model itself that needs to be critiqued. She may judge, for example, that there are not three ultimates but fewer or more. An “ontotheological” nonconvergent pluralist, for example, might argue for the existence of only two: the Cosmos and a God that is not distinguished from Being Itself. A nontheistic naturalist might recognize only Creativity and the Cosmos but not God. Since each of these positions would also involve the critique of religious teachings that conflict with it, the forms of religious critique made possible by nonconvergent pluralism are quite broad.

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