

# HUMBLE CONFSSIONALISM

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**Abstract.** Much of the appeal of religious pluralism for those who take religious truth claims seriously arises from the sense that confessionalist alternatives to pluralism that affirm the truth of one particular religion are unacceptable. Pluralists try to foster this sense by portraying confessionalist views as implausible for one who is fully informed about the facts of religious diversity. However, when pluralists attempt to rule out confessionalism, they tend to characterize it in ways that overlook the possibility of what I call humble confessionalism. When humble forms of confessionalism are considered, representations of pluralism as the only viable option become less persuasive.

Religious pluralism ascribes some type of epistemic and soteriological equality to multiple religions. Much of the appeal of the pluralistic approach to religious diversity for people who take religious truth claims seriously arises from the sense that it is unacceptable to think that one religion has done much better than the rest in reaching the truth about matters vital to human fulfillment. When we come to understand and appreciate the admirable features of various religions and the admirable qualities of their adherents, elevating one religion above the rest can seem provincial and narrow-minded, inclining us to entertain favorably the idea that religions with conflicting accounts and diverse prescriptions may, nevertheless, be equally adequate guides to finding the kind of truth available for human beings regarding their highest good.

Peter Byrne uses the term “confessionalism” for non-pluralist views that affirm the truth of a particular religion and evaluate the claims of other religions in the light of the favored religion’s account. He distinguishes between exclusivist versions of confessionalism that say the highest human fulfillment is attainable only through participating in the specific path prescribed by this religion and inclusivist forms of confessionalism that acknowledge adherents of other religions can attain the specified end without accepting the distinctive teachings and engaging in the prescribed practices of the religion that is taken

to be true. If we reject agnosticism about whether any religious accounts are true, as well as views that deny truth to any religious accounts (which Byrne in different contexts labels “scepticism” or “naturalism”), then ruling out confessionalism leaves some kind of pluralism as the only remaining option.

While attempting to eliminate the competition to religious pluralism can be a powerful argumentative move, alternatives to pluralism are sometimes represented in ways that distort the issue of whether they are acceptable. Consider, for example, the way Byrne describes options other than pluralism:

To the question “Can any one religion be true?” the naturalist answers that we know enough to know that they are all false. The confessionalist answers “Yes; and we know that *this* one is in fact true.”<sup>1</sup>

The characterization of confessionalism, as well as naturalism, involves a claim to a high degree of objective justification about what is affirmed. Both the naturalist and the confessionalist accounts are represented as making claims about what “we know”.

Furthermore, the confessionalist statement about truth lacks any qualification or nuance. The claim is not that a particular religious view is an approximation of the truth or true with respect to some set of core teachings or more convincing than available alternatives — but simply that it is true. By way of contrast, Byrne specifies precisely the sense in which his pluralist view takes religions to be cognitively equal, and instead of the overconfident stance ascribed to confessionalists, he portrays pluralism as a modest view. It affirms that there is good enough reason for *postulating* that multiple religions are equally successful in referring to a religious ultimate and for *taking an agnostic stance* toward specific claims made by these religions:

Epistemically it [pluralism] is a form of agnosticism toward religions. In contrast to the religious sceptic, the pluralist affirms that between them, the religions provide enough grounds for postulating a religious ultimate. In contrast to religious exclusivists and inclusivists, the pluralist concludes that the grounds for the specific doctrinal claims of the religions cancel each other out. Adherents of different religions may be entitled to their religious convictions, but no set of creedal claims is objectively more certain than another set.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Peter Byrne, “It Is Not Reasonable to Believe that Only One Religion Is True”, in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. M. Peterson and R. VanArrogon (Blackwell, 2004), 204.

2 Peter Byrne, “Religious Tolerance, Diversity, and Pluralism”, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 68 (2011): 297.

Here we have religious pluralism portrayed as a sort of middle ground between the outright denial of cognitive value to religion and the excessive dogmatism of those who affirm the truth of very specific religious claims that can't be established as "objectively more certain" than alternatives. But aren't there other possibilities than the kind of confessionalism Byrne describes? Suppose a confessionalist agrees that specific religious claims should be treated as uncertain in a theoretical context where they are disputed, but is convinced enough by some of these claims to presume their truth for purposes of practice. Or suppose a confessionalist is committed to a particular religious tradition, but treats the religious doctrines that are accepted as revisable in the light of relevant evidence, rather than claiming to know that a particular formulation is correct. Or suppose a confessionalist regards allegiance to the core claims of some religious tradition as an epistemic strategy that is adopted as more promising than the pluralist strategy of positing equality among major religious traditions. In other words do we have to imagine the confessionalist alternative to pluralism to involve excessive confidence in the correctness of a detailed religious account, or can we entertain the possibility of a more humble form of confessionalism? If humble confessionalism is a realistic option, then it becomes more difficult to defend pluralism by eliminating confessionalist alternatives from the outset.

The kind of argumentative strategy I am challenging presumes the viability of judging positions on religious diversity inadequate on the basis of some deficiency of their general type. To leave pluralism as the only viable alternative, it is not enough to show that particular versions of confessionalism are inadequate; one must show the unacceptability of all positions that fall under this general category. I will be arguing in the first section that it is problematic to try to establish much at the required level of generality because the typology of positions on religious diversity being used is riddled with ambiguities that lead to misleading oversimplifications. Overlooking humble confessionalism is a specific instance of the more general tendency to take for granted a particular paradigmatic form of the type being considered and failing to notice versions that deviate from that paradigm. The initial section shows how easy it is to make this kind of mistake.

In the second section I offer a characterization of humble confessionalism in terms of a disposition not to adopt higher-order epistemic attitudes about religious claims that presuppose a greater level of certainty than is appropriate.

Given a reflective awareness of the facts relating to disagreement about religious claims, humble confessionalists recognize that their religious views involve a significant degree of epistemic risk. I focus on the kind of humble confessionalist who thinks of his or her views as a work in progress that is revisable in the light of relevant evidence. I also argue in this section against confusing this kind of humble position with being tentative. The third section describes and responds to some objections to humble confessionalism. The final section elaborates on a response to a pluralist objection by showing how a humble confessionalist could have reason to presume the truth of a particular religion.

## I. AMBIGUITIES AND THE STANDARD TYPOLOGY

The standard positions on diversity for those who adopt some religious approach are usually taken to be exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Moreover, it is assumed that a given individual's view will fall under only one category. But as I shall show, one can be both a pluralist and an exclusivist, or one can be both an exclusivist and an inclusivist. We can clear up the ambiguities that lead to this result, but when we do, the fact that a view is of a particular type becomes less informative than is generally assumed, and arguments that try to eliminate views on the basis of some inadequacy of their general type become problematic.

Some philosophers, such as McKim and Griffiths, characterize exclusivists and inclusivists as disagreeing about religious truth, as well as disagreeing about salvation or liberation.<sup>3</sup> However, I will follow what I take to be the standard way of using the threefold typology and represent the exclusivist and inclusivist as agreeing about truth, while disagreeing about salvation or liberation. My use of the terms is defined as follows: An *exclusivist* affirms the truth of the basic account offered by one religion (which, following Paul Griffiths, I will call the *home religion*<sup>4</sup>) and holds that the way of salvation or liberation prescribed by this religion is available only to those who accept the home religion's core message. A *pluralist* claims that multiple religions provide accounts that are equally true (or equally adequate with regard to truth)

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3 Robert McKim, *On Religious Diversity* (OUP, 2012); Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

4 Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, xiv–xv.

and that salvation or liberation is equally attainable through the means designated by any of the specified group of religions. An *inclusivist* agrees with the exclusivist position on religious truth (which makes both approaches instances of what Byrne calls *confessionalism*), but extends the opportunity to attain salvation or liberation to some outside the home religion who have not accepted that religion's core message.

Attempting to use the standard schema to classify responses to religious diversity can reveal ambiguities that result in an individual's position fitting under more than one category. For example, the Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso) turns out to be both an exclusivist and a pluralist, depending on what religious end is being considered. He is an exclusivist when it comes to what needs to be accepted to attain Buddhist liberation, claiming, "The *mokṣa* which is described in Buddhist religion is achieved only through the practice of emptiness."<sup>5</sup> Only someone who enters the Buddhist thought world and follows Buddhist practices can attain this Buddhist end. On the other hand, he is a pluralist when it comes to achievement of what he says is an end toward which many religions are directed: "permanent human happiness". He claims that people with very different belief systems can attain this more generic end. From the perspective he calls the "widest possible viewpoint" the conflict between religious doctrines can be regarded as unimportant. From this viewpoint, he says we should think of beliefs in terms of their instrumental value, i.e., their conduciveness to achievement of the desired end.<sup>6</sup>

It might be objected that of the two ends, he will have to regard one as the highest human good and that his stance in relation to that end will determine whether he is a pluralist or an exclusivist. However, by his own account, he is describing things from different viewpoints. From one perspective he can look at religious phenomena and declare that there is a common end that the major religions are achieving in varying degrees. But as an adherent of his own tradition, he offers a rich characterization of a particular end that is attainable only through Buddhist practice. If asked which is the supreme end, his answer is likely to be that it depends on which viewpoint he is using. He might believe that the Buddhist goal is the highest human end, but he refrains

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5 Dalai Lama, "Buddhism and Other Religions", in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael L. Peterson et al. (OUP, 2014), 597.

6 *Ibid.*, 596.

from offering a pronouncement on the matter when stepping back from the Buddhist thought world to take what he calls a wider viewpoint for considering religious phenomena. For example, he speaks from this wider perspective when he advises nonBuddhists who are satisfied with their own religion to stick with it, instead of urging them to become Buddhists.<sup>7</sup>

When John Hick defends his form of religious pluralism, he posits an end that he judges common to the major religious traditions: transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Thinking in terms of this end, he can acknowledge a multiplicity of ways of achieving it and view the various doctrines of each religion in instrumental terms. But there is no inconsistency in recognizing the legitimacy of a pluralist way of thinking about an end described very generally and also having a specific concept of the desired end that is attainable only by accepting particular doctrines and engaging in particular practices. In fact Hick himself insists that it is only by entering into the experiential world of some particular religious tradition and learning to perceive things in terms of a specific portrayal that the more generic end he values is attained.<sup>8</sup> What makes Hick a pluralist and not an exclusivist is that from his viewpoint external to religious traditions he makes meta-claims about the kind of truth that is permissible in each tradition that serve to correct internal religious claims that conflict with pluralism. There is no indication that the Dalai Lama makes a similar move, and it is easy to imagine him thinking that while “permanent human happiness” is a useful concept for certain purposes, it does not replace the thicker accounts of religious ends found in different traditions and that the pluralist viewpoint he accepts cannot be used to override and correct claims made within these traditions. To take such a view, he need not regard particular traditions as immune from criticism. He might simply doubt that the kind of pluralist perspective on religions he thinks legitimate provides a sufficient basis for correcting the claims particular religions make.

Besides the ambiguity about religious ends that gives rise to the possibility of being an exclusivist and a pluralist, there is also an ambiguity that arises in relation to the dispute between exclusivists and inclusivists. When an exclusivist insists that particular beliefs are required to attain some reli-

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7 *Ibid.*, 597.

8 John Hick, *God has Many Names* (Westminster Press, 1982), 21.

gious end, should we understand the claim to mean that they are required currently or eventually?<sup>9</sup> If we take the exclusivist claim to mean that one cannot ultimately attain the specified religious end without acquiring the key beliefs, this claim is compatible with the possibility that someone who does not before death have the proper beliefs could acquire them in a postmortem state. But an exclusivist who accepts this possibility may not be much different from an inclusivist who acknowledges continued development after death, but is willing to broaden the description of the religious end from its tradition-specific portrayal to a more generically described end that doesn't require tradition-specific beliefs and would be available now to participants in other religions. The difference between this sort of exclusivist and this sort of inclusivist is that the exclusivist is talking about the fully completed end and the inclusivist is talking about a significant stage in a process that potentially leads at some point to this end. Once we clear up the verbal dispute, we could have someone who is an exclusivist with regard to one description of the end and an inclusivist with regard to another description.

Discussions of religious diversity often assume that claims of exclusivity with regard to some supreme religious end are problematic. For example, Hick says that because Christian exclusivism that affirms a unique divine incarnation through which alone salvation is possible

... seems so unrealistic in the light of our knowledge of the wider religious life of mankind, many theologians have moved to some form of inclusivism, but now feel unable to go further and follow the argument to its conclusion in the frank acceptance of pluralism.<sup>10</sup>

But what is it about the facts of religious diversity that makes this sort of exclusivism untenable? Hick's discussion does not provide a clear answer, but the problem he identifies as motivating inclusivist alternatives to exclusivism is that "salvation is restricted to this one group, the rest of mankind being either left out of the account or explicitly excluded from the sphere of salvation."<sup>11</sup> If that is the issue, however, the kind of exclusivism he finds problematic is a version that holds that the supreme end must be attained during a single earthly life.

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9 Keith Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions", *Religious Studies* 26, no. 1 (1990): 15. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, 157–58.

10 John Hick, "A Philosophy of Religious Pluralism", in *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, ed. John Hick (St. Martin's Press, 1985), 34–35.

11 *Ibid.*, 31.

What about exclusivists who reject this assumption? Consider, for example, the Dalai Lama's exclusivism. He says that because there are many lives, those who do not attain Buddhist liberation in their current life may be ready to attain it in some future life.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, Hick himself posits multiple lives after death in which progress can be made toward an ultimate end. His claims about continued development after death are crucial to his soul-making theodicy.<sup>13</sup> While he prefers to characterize the ultimate end in a way that does not depend on acquiring knowledge that is available only from a specific historical tradition, an exclusivist who thinks that such knowledge is needed for the desired transformation to be complete could posit that it will be available eventually to those who are ready to receive it. Even if some exclusivists reject such a move, Hick's objection would not have force against versions of exclusivism that affirm this sort of extended opportunity.

Noticing the ambiguities that arise when we attempt to apply the standard typology should alert us to the danger of oversimplifying when we refer to the general types as if they constituted a specific position. To discuss a specific view, we need to know more about it than whether it fits into a particular category, and we also need to recognize that some views that fit in a particular category can be closer to views in other categories than to views in the same category. So, for example, an inclusivist who interprets the supreme religious end offered in the home religion in such a way that the beliefs needed to attain it are minimal may be closer to some pluralists than to some inclusivists who share the same religion. Similarly, a humble confessionalist may have much in common with a humble pluralist, but be at a considerable distance from confessionalists in the same tradition whose stances do not exhibit intellectual humility.

## II. CAN CONFESSIONALISM BE HUMBLE?

It should be acknowledged that there are plenty of examples of confessionalists who are not humble with regard to their religious claims. But what does it mean to have this kind of humility? Alan Hazlett characterizes intellectual humility as a disposition to adopt proper higher-order epistemic attitudes.<sup>14</sup> The

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12 Dalai Lama, 597.

13 John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (Harper & Row, 1976), 160.

14 Allan Hazlett, "Higher-order Epistemic Attitudes and Intellectual Humility", *Episteme* 9, no. 3 (2012).

higher-order attitudes he has in mind involve appraisals of the epistemic status of one's first-order propositional assents. It is possible to appraise one's own views in ways that underestimate the possibility of being in error. But someone with intellectual humility refrains from higher-order attitudes that presume a greater degree of objective certainty than that person can legitimately claim. Since competent and well-intentioned people are unable to reach agreement about religious truth claims, a high degree of confidence that one is right about these matters would indicate a lack of intellectual humility.

Recognizing that one does not have a high degree of objective certainty about religious claims could alternatively be described as recognizing that making these claims involves a significant degree of epistemic risk. The fact that others disagree does not by itself imply significant epistemic risk. Sometimes we can confidently explain disagreement by appealing to some cognitive or motivational failure on the part of those with whom we disagree or some clear epistemic advantage that we have. But virtually every substantial religious claim is disputed by people we have reason to think of as being well intentioned, informed, and capable. In this kind of case humility calls for recognizing that we don't have strong grounds for making second-order pronouncements about who is right and who is wrong. It may be that in particular cases one side is in fact better attuned to the relevant evidence than the other, but often we are not in a position to judge with any objectivity which side is better attuned, or even whether the differences are appropriately characterized in purely evidential terms.

It might be imagined that having humility would mean refraining from truth claims on these matters altogether. However, a reflective awareness of epistemic risk exhibited by a disposition to avoid higher-order attitudes that presume an inappropriate level of certainty is compatible with a wide range of first-order cognitive attitudes. One who acknowledges a significant degree of epistemic risk might accept something as true, presume it to be true, adopt it as a working hypothesis, trust that it is true, or even believe it to be true.<sup>15</sup> In

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15 In recent years a number of philosophers have provided accounts of a variety of propositional attitudes other than belief that might qualify as faith stances. Examples include: William Alston, "Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith", in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality: Philosophy of religion today*, ed. Jeffrey L. Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); Richard Swinburne, *Faith and reason* (Clarendon Press, 2005), 115–18; Robert Audi, "Belief, Faith, and Acceptance", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 63, no. 1–3 (2008); Daniel

religious contexts people often implicitly acknowledge the objective uncertainty of particular views by calling them faith claims or by speaking of their stance in terms of trusting. Such an acknowledgement of uncertainty does not preclude the possibility of a first-order propositional attitude as strong as belief. I might believe that a friend's actions are well intentioned, even while recognizing that because I trust the friend I am viewing what he does with less skepticism than I might have adopted.

Nevertheless, we might wonder whether someone who exhibits this sort of humility is a confessionalist in the sense that this term is used as a position on the issue of religious diversity. To be a confessionalist involves affirming the truth of a particular religion. Is someone who takes the claims made by this religion to be uncertain in a position to make such an affirmation? It depends on what kind of affirmation is required. While at a reflective level, such an individual would presumably refrain from claiming knowledge or a high degree of objective justification, we often adopt philosophical positions that involve no such claims. After carefully considering the issues, I might become convinced of the truth of the libertarian view on free will, defending this position in philosophical debates and presuming its truth in my reasoning about other matters. But I might also acknowledge that the matter is open to reasonable dispute and that while I hold that this view is true, I do so with the recognition that I am taking an epistemic risk. My unwillingness to claim a high level of certainty does not mean that I am not adopting a position in the relevant sense.

So far I have been describing minimal conditions for being a humble confessionalist. However, my focus will be on humble confessionalists who not only refrain from thinking of their own religious views as more certain than they are entitled to, but think of their views as at best an approximation of the truth that is subject to revision. While there can be humble confessionalists who do not treat their views as revisable, a humble confessionalist who is sufficiently well informed and reflective has reason to take such a stance. Reflection on the historical development of teachings within one's own religious tradition provides reason to view individual and corporate formulations of those teachings as more like a work in progress than a finished product.

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Howard-Snyder, "Propositional Faith: What It Is and What It Is Not", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013).

A well-informed member of a long-lasting historical tradition will be aware that the tradition's formulations have undergone significant change. Religious communities that survive rethink and reformulate their claims in the light of new understandings and new circumstances. Consider, for example, the prophetic rethinking of the significance of animal sacrifice in Hebrew religion, or the critique and reinterpretation of anthropomorphic portrayals of deity in the sacred texts of theistic communities. Communities develop interpretations of their sacred texts that diverge significantly from the way they were understood by earlier members of the tradition. Even when the same verbal formulas are maintained, there are often shifts in how the formulas are understood. So a humble confessionalist who is aware of how the tradition's message has been altered over time has reason to regard the formulations at a particular point in time as fallible attempts to articulate the truth that may need additional revision.

Furthermore, if we take any major world religion as an example, there will be conflicting interpretations at the current time of what the fundamental teachings of that religion mean. The extent of diversity within a religious tradition can be significant. For example, Christians may agree that Jesus died for the sins of the world or that he was God incarnate, while having a variety of incompatible accounts of the meaning of these claims. A confessionalist who is aware of the diversity of accounts, even of core religious teachings, within the tradition she is committed to has some reason to wonder whether her own versions are closer to the truth than conflicting versions accepted by other members of the same tradition. When this sort of awareness is combined with the awareness of reflective confessionalists that their own individual religious claims have been revised over time in an attempt to reach a better-informed or more mature or deeper faith, the situation is conducive to thinking of the formulations at any given point as an approximation that should not simply be identified with the full truth.

This sort of openness to revision might be confused with tentativeness. Admittedly, it does mean being tentative about some religious claims. However, being open to revising one's religious affirmations when relevant evidence provides good reason to do so can be compatible with holding tenaciously to some affirmations that are regarded as central to a particular religious identity. I might acknowledge that a particular version of Muslim teachings is no longer viable, but if I can find a version that is viable and arguably faithful to

the overall tradition, I can continue to hold on to my commitment to being a Muslim. Such a stance depends, of course, on distinguishing between core teachings that are not easily revised and elaborations of those teachings that can more easily be altered. Reflective adherents generally draw this kind of line, even if they are unclear about whether some items should be regarded as part of the core or not. But the process of reflection sometimes results in an altered understanding of what the essential core is. When this kind of change occurs, one ideally comes to regard the revised teachings as offering a deeper understanding of the meaning of a tradition. Nevertheless, even though a humble confessionalist might change her mind about a great many things, the epistemic conservatism of this procedure makes it misleading to describe the attitude toward the full range of religious affirmations as tentative.

Some writers say that awareness of religious diversity is a strong reason for being tentative about religious claims. For example, Penelhum says that his awareness of the multiplicity of rational alternatives alienates him from fellow Christians who seem to have certainty. He suggests, "... better, surely, I cannot help telling myself, to be Socrates tentative than a pig without questions."<sup>16</sup> Being tentative here seems to be thought of as contrasting with being too certain to need to question or reflect. But to portray the choice as between being reflective and tentative, or being a pig without questions surely oversimplifies the options. There is a kind of tentativeness that we admire in reflective discourse, an unwillingness to settle too easily or firmly when there is still reasonable dispute we should consider. But when there is a practical necessity of acting on the basis of some view, there is also a kind of tentativeness we do not admire. It is sometimes a virtue to decisively commit to a view that can guide our action, even when we cannot claim a high level of certainty. The choice is not really between being tentative and holding views that are not subject to reflection. The ideal is to integrate the tentativeness that is appropriate for reflection with the decisiveness that is sometimes called for. I suspect that Socrates would agree. His reluctance to claim knowledge about some matters is combined with a noteworthy tendency to treat some claims about how to live, such as his own claim about his call to a particular mission in life, as foundational.

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16 Terence Penelhum, "A Belated Return", in *Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of 11 Leading Thinkers*, ed. Kelly J. Clark (InterVarsity Press, 1993), 234.

Because of the practical function of religious truth claims, at least some of them need to be accepted with a degree of firmness that it would be misleading to call tentative. Compare the religious situation to other situations in which there is something of practical importance, as well as something of epistemic importance, at stake. I might hold with considerable firmness to the view that my spouse is faithful, despite recognizing that this is the kind of claim people are often wrong about and that the kind of evidence I have cannot provide certainty, even if I am not myself in doubt about the matter. I might even view my tenaciousness as needed for seeking a relational good that I am otherwise unlikely to attain. My firmness of belief does not have to mean that I could never question it or that I would hold onto it regardless of what evidence against it I become aware of, but being open to revising a belief under conceivable circumstances does not amount to holding it tentatively.

### III. OBJECTIONS TO HUMBLE CONFSSIONALISM

One objection to the sort of humble confessionism that I am describing is that there appears to be a tension between recognizing first-order religious claims as uncertain, yet being confident enough about them to act with the kind of wholeheartedness that a religious way of life calls for. Even if humble confessionism is a possible stance, it might be urged, it would fall too far short of the confidence that religious communities regard as an ideal. I think that this objection is a product of confusing different notions of confidence.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes philosophers speak of levels of confidence, with a maximal level correlating with an appropriate judgment of absolute certainty. If we are talking about this sort of confidence, the humble confessionist who recognizes significant epistemic risk would have a relatively low level of confidence. However, the aspiration for religious confidence is not primarily about the quality of assent to particular propositions. It is more fundamentally about acquiring modes of perception that are conducive to full engagement with a religious way of life.

Someone who believes some core set of religious teachings with great confidence might be a long way from living the way of life those teachings are

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<sup>17</sup> See my "Confident Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue", *International Philosophical Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2017).

used to promote, and someone whose cognitive attitude would not qualify as belief might have developed the ability to perceive events habitually in ways that are conducive to living this way of life.

The confidence that arises from inhabiting a perceptual world that is structured by a religious account and trusting that what is perceived is a reliable indication of the way things are does depend on acquiring the right kinds of cognitive and affective states. However, the states that are cultivated in learning to perceive things in religious terms should not be identified with those that we might adopt in a reflective context where more skeptical attitudes are called for. Hence, a humble confessionalist can aspire to the sort of confidence most relevant to acting wholeheartedly without aspiring to the kind of certainty that would be needed for the epistemic confidence philosophers describe.

In addition to objections regarding the religious adequacy of humble confessionalism, there are also objections that arise from a pluralist standpoint. However some of the standard pluralist arguments against confessionalism seem weaker when applied to humble confessionalism. Consider the charge that there is something arrogant about thinking that your own religious revelation is true and that everyone else's is false. Wilfred Cantrell Smith represents Christian exclusivists as saying to devout and intelligent people from other faiths, "We believe that we know God, and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong."<sup>18</sup> Part of the problem here is that Cantwell Smith conflates the question of whether a particular way of thinking is permissible with the question of whether it should be bluntly expressed to another person. But even aside from that issue, the declaration of one's own rightness and the other party's wrongness can be understood in different ways. If I believe some proposition, then I think it true. But for some claims, I will recognize that I am not in a position to make a second-order pronouncement about whether it is true because the claim is open to reasonable dispute. Saying that it is true might just be a confirmation that I believe it, or it might be a declaration that there is no more need for discussion, since the matter is settled. One way of understanding the claim makes it arrogant, but the other does not. With regard to judging the other person totally wrong, the expression "You are totally wrong" could just mean that I think that your position is wrong in some fundamental way. But it seems objectionable because

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18 Wilfred C. Smith, *Religious Diversity: Essays* (Harper & Row, 1976).

it sounds like a rejection of the other person's core convictions as unworthy of serious consideration or a repudiation of the person's way of life as unworthy of respect. While there are confessionalists who make such judgments, we might expect humble confessionalists to have greater awareness of their own fallibility and perhaps greater appreciation of alternative forms of spirituality.

In the imagined conversation with someone of another religion suppose that both parties begin with an acceptance of the core teachings of their own tradition. Suppose also that the teachings of these traditions conflict in significant ways. In such a case we can say that each person thinks that the other is wrong about some things. But we don't have to assume that those who approach this kind of conversation think that announcing their rightness and the other party's wrongness settles anything, and we can imagine a conversation in which both are open to the possibility of learning from each other. Even if I think that my religion is fundamentally true or that it is an approximation of the truth, I don't have to claim the kind of certainty that results in dismissing other perspectives without a hearing. For a humble confessionalist who accepts the possibility of being wrong and is willing to revise her account in the light of relevant considerations, the encounter with an intelligent and pious representative of another religion might even provide an impetus for rethinking some of her own truth claims.

Besides the arrogance objection, another standard pluralist objection to confessionalism is the claim that it is arbitrary. We might suspect that this objection is particularly problematic for a humble confessionalist. If the confessionalist acknowledges that his religion can't be established from a neutral standpoint as rationally superior to the alternatives, on what grounds can it be designated as true? I will consider the arbitrariness objection in a version that comes from John Hick. Hick says, "I think that there is in fact a good argument for the rationality of trusting one's own religious experience, together with that of the larger tradition within which it occurs, so as both to believe and to live on the basis of it..."<sup>19</sup> But Hick argues that if only one religion is true, religious experience generally is an unreliable way of forming beliefs. Thinking that in the case of your own religion it is a reliable way to reach the truth, but not for other religions, Hick claims, appears "arbitrary and unjusti-

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19 Hick, "A Philosophy of Religious Pluralism", 37.

fied unless it is supported by good arguments.”<sup>20</sup> The alternative Hick offers, of course, is a revised assessment of the meaning of your own truth claims in the light of a pluralist understanding of religious truth that revokes a privileged status to your own religion that is not granted to others.

It is important to notice what Hick means by religious experience. On his account religious experience involves what he calls “experiencing as” where one construes events in terms of some conceptual system that is brought to experience. So, for example, one might experience some incident as divine guidance or as a result of a karmic process. Having this kind of experience can be thought of as a product of training in the use of a particular community’s religious terminology and learning to apply it in paradigmatic ways. Experiencing this kind of religious significance will involve presuming truth claims that are embedded in the community’s framework, and typically one who becomes proficient in using a particular framework to structure perception and guide action comes to believe some claims that have been presumed. Hick endorses this pattern of belief formation and characterizes it as trusting one’s own religious experience. However, he thinks that there is something arbitrary about trusting religious experience in the case of your own religion, but regarding it as untrustworthy in the case of other religions.

Would such selective trust be arbitrary? It would if we think that what is reliable is something called religious experience, functioning apart from the particular religious claims that structure it. However, for the kind of experience Hick is discussing, it doesn’t seem particularly surprising that doxastic practices that involve perceiving things by means of religious frameworks that contain conflicting truth claims would result in conflicting beliefs. To trust this kind of religious experience to produce true belief one would need to presume that the teachings structuring this experience are true. Whether or not this kind of trust is arbitrary depends on whether one has reason to presume the truth of a particular religion that is not a reason to presume the truth of other religions as well.

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20 John Hick, “The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism”, *Faith and Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (1997): 278.

#### IV. PRESUMING THE TRUTH OF A RELIGION

The question of whether to presume the truth of a particular religion can be understood as arising within a practical context where we need some account that could structure a way of life. We may be able to live without an explicit account of what makes life worthwhile, but our choices tend to reveal implicit assumptions about reality and value. If the assumptions were systematically developed, we might call the resultant account a vision of human fulfillment. Religious accounts offer this kind of vision, as do functionally equivalent secular accounts. There are obvious advantages to having an explicit vision of this type that can serve as a practical guide. Insofar as we want a fairly coherent way of life, we could even call having this kind of guide a practical necessity.

However, visions of human fulfillment are explicated in terms of contestable claims about reality. Religious views contain claims about transcendent realities, such as God or Nirvana, but secular accounts also include disputed metaphysical claims, such as the claim that all reality is physical. When we consider religious views, it is these metaphysical claims that stand out. But while deliberation about metaphysical claims can be relevant to deciding whether to adopt a religious view or a nonreligious alternative, it is not by itself decisive. Finding metaphysical claims unbelievable is a reason for ruling out an account, but to find an account acceptable, one must be attracted to its ethical vision. As Samuel Fleischacker puts it, "... we can't and normally don't simply base our religious beliefs on metaphysics, but we may use views on these matters to choose among religious claims that otherwise strike us as morally and telically attractive."<sup>21</sup>

Given our practical concerns, we have reason to presume the truth of some view of our overall good. But the situated character of human rationality and of human ethical responses means that our assessments of the alternatives will diverge. A humble confessionalist acknowledges as much. She does not claim to have surveyed all possible views from some neutral standpoint and determined that a particular one is true. Rather, she is drawn to a particular ethical vision and judges the account that makes it intelligible to be defensible. As long as she is aware of no alternative that seems clearly supe-

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21 Samuel Fleischacker, *The Good and the Good Book: Revelation as a Guide to Life* (OUP, 2015), 70.

rior, presuming the truth of this view can be regarded as both a practical and an epistemic strategy.

Pluralists find this strategy defective. The pluralist suspicion of confessionalism appears to be connected with the appeal of what we might call an egalitarian epistemology that makes truths about matters related to shaping a way of life equally available. Byrne says that his own views on the issue reflect a “dislike of claims to epistemic privilege” and a drive toward “universalist and egalitarian ideas about cognition.”<sup>22</sup> Having this sort of aversion or attraction may explain why he prefers pluralism, but it is not the sort of reason that shows some pluralist account more likely to be true. Regardless of what we prefer, it may be that some tradition has made assumptions or acquired insights or developed concepts that have put its adherents in a superior position to be receptive to some kinds of truth.

Perhaps, however, the issue is not really whether some particular religious view might be closer to the truth. Byrne acknowledges the possibility, but he argues that not being able to establish that any religious view is “objectively more certain” than any other gives us a reason to take an agnostic stance toward all detailed religious accounts. He understands this agnostic stance to conflict with reasonably believing particular doctrinal claims. He says that even if particular claims of this sort might be true in the sense of corresponding to reality, they are “presumed by pluralism not to describe reality truly, in detail, with any certainty” and, hence, can’t be affirmed to be “unequivocally, categorically true.”<sup>23</sup>

Byrne seems to me to conflate the issue of whether a view is true or might be reasonably accepted with the question of whether detailed accounts can be regarded as objectively certain. In the first place, we can distinguish the detailed accounts, roughly at least, from the core vision of things. To think that all such accounts are significantly flawed when we get to the details is different from thinking that we have no reasons for regarding the central core of some account to be closer to the truth than the core claims of competing accounts. Byrne might object that those reasons don’t amount to objective certainty, but here he is setting a high bar. When I try to establish that a comprehensive guide of this

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22 Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion* (Macmillan Press; St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 193.

23 *Ibid.*, 202.

kind is objectively more certain than the alternatives, I have to set aside some intuitions and assumptions that I am fairly confident of, but which I recognize as open to challenge. In other words I have to disregard much of what makes an account of this type seem plausible or implausible from my own perspective. A policy of accepting only what I can establish as objectively more certain means being fairly skeptical with regard to some kinds of truth claims.

Even if no religious account can be shown to be objectively more certain than the alternatives, it wouldn't follow that the only reasonable response is to presume that all such accounts are untrue. When we need to act on the basis of some view of things, it can be reasonable to presume the truth of a view we find more convincing than the available alternatives. If we consider potential ethical visions that might guide our lives, we can rule out some on the grounds that we are unable to presume the accounts they offer to be true. But there are likely to be some that appeal to what William James called our "believing tendencies". It is possible that there are multiple views that we could presume to be true, but often a particular view will have in James's terms a greater degree of liveness.<sup>24</sup> When, to use T. W. Mawson's phrase, we need to put our money on something,<sup>25</sup> it is surely not unreasonable to commit to a view we find convincing enough to live by.

Presuming a view to be true may lead to first-order states that are indistinguishable from belief, but whether it does or not, it makes possible a project of learning to perceive and act in accordance with the view that is presumed. In presuming a view to be true, one is also presuming that truth claims that conflict with it are false. Pluralists propose various ways to resolve such conflicts, such as positing multiple phenomenal realities or suggesting that some truth claims be understood as mythological. Confessionalsists can agree that some apparent conflicts can be dissolved, but they reject the kind of revision of the meaning of truth claims needed to interpret all such conflicts as only apparent. In the case of conflicts they take to be genuine, confessionalsists follow the ordinary procedure of rejecting claims that conflict with what they have presumed true.

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24 William James, "The Will to Believe", 5 (2011 [1919]): 2–3.

25 T. J. Mawson, "Byrne's' Religious Pluralism", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58, no. 1 (2005): 51–52.

I have not been trying to assess the merits or weaknesses of pluralism. Instead I have been trying to resist a seductive move often made by pluralists to remove confessionalist competitors from the field. There are undoubtedly versions of confessionalism that are defective for various reasons, but a sufficiently humble form of confessionalism is able to incorporate some pluralist insights without abandoning the kind of deep engagement in a particular tradition that is difficult to reconcile with pluralist views. When pluralists dismiss confessionalism easily, I suspect that they overlook the possibility of what I have called humble confessionalism.

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