

The British Society for the
Philosophy of Religion

Realism and Philosophy of Religion Conference

*Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford
13-15 September, 2005*

Religious Pluralism and Referential Realism¹

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Abstract

Religious plurality is a fact of our time. It cannot be avoided. Neither can it be factually acknowledged then cognitively shunned, except by enacting a most obtuse denial. Religious plurality demands a cognitive response. The pressing question is how to comprehend both other religions in themselves and, of course, reflect on what they mean in respect of comprehending one's own. If other religions are not to be denied, are they to be treated as equal? Do religions aspire to the same goal? Are they just varying paths with the same end? What is the nature of the reality embedded in the notion of religious plurality?

It is in response to issues such as these that the paradigm of pluralism has emerged to challenge not only any narrow exclusivism, but also the more subtle inclusivism where one religion is perceived to function as the dominant paradigm to which all others, in some sense, are subsumed. In this paper I shall briefly review, and critically discuss, the paradigm of religious pluralism with particular reference to the work of Peter Byrne with respect to referential realism.²

I

Generally speaking, pluralism refers to the intellectual stance of embracing the fact of plurality and giving it a positive interpretation. Religious pluralism, as a conceptual construct, may be viewed on this basis as an assertion of a "measure of equal standing between the major religious traditions" at the very least. It certainly entails a denial of any type "of uniqueness and absoluteness claimed for one tradition or another".³ Religious pluralism opens the way to

situating particular religious identity within a larger framework of understanding and knowledge. In this sense, pluralism is but “one important intellectual response to the fact of religious diversity”.⁴

The advocating of a paradigm of pluralism needs, of course, to be seen in the context of countering the alternate paradigms of exclusivism and inclusivism. The paradigm of exclusivism has to do with the material identification of a particular religion (or form of that religion) with the essence and substance of true universal religion as such, thereby excluding all other possibilities to that claim. From this viewpoint, the exclusivist’s religion is the ‘Only Right One’. For the exclusivist the mere co-existence of religions is not possible. Instead, the tendency to exclusive self-assertion predominates. By contrast, inclusivism may be regarded as the effective identity of a particular religion with the universal, albeit with some allowance made for others within the predominating schema. That is to say, this paradigm suggests the ‘other’ is included surreptitiously, by being understood, as already and ‘anonymously’, indirectly within the fold of the ‘true religion’ identified, of course, as being the religion of the proponent – the ‘Only Fully Right One’.

The paradigms of exclusivism and inclusivism are both premised on the notion that there is but one universal truth or religion whereby the relationship between the universal and specific is problematic. Either way it is taken as a *sine qua non* of ‘universal’ that there can be only one valid expression of it in terms of particular form. Thus the religious exclusivist makes an assumption that his or her religion is, in fact, the only universally true one. All others are necessarily false. The inclusivist holds views that allow for a measure of universal religious truth being found in more than one particular religion, but that, nonetheless, it is his or her religion that fully contains, or is the full expression of, the universal truth. Does this suggest pluralism offers a way forward instead? Perhaps, but the paradigm of pluralism is no less problematic.

II

The essential idea of pluralism, as an ideological or hermeneutical response to the fact of plurality, is to posit a multiplicity of particular expressions of that

which is deemed to be universal, in opposition to the idea that there can only be but one legitimate – or fully valid – expression of the universal. This means, *prima facie*, that pluralism affirms the different religions as in some sense equally valid expressions of a universal ‘religious reality’. Specific religions are thus viewed as co-equally valid expressions of some universal notion of ‘true religion’. Thus both difference and equality are affirmed. Religions are not all the ‘same’ – their differences are important; yet religions are no better or worse than each other as equally valid expressions of the universal. On this basis, no one religion can lay claim to an objective superiority, or superlative congruence with the universal religious reality, in respect to other religions. However, pluralism itself is no one thing. For example, as Byrne remarks:

Some versions of the pluralist response focus on truth, affirming that all religions are equally true. Other versions focus on salvation, affirming that all religions are equally valid paths to salvation. Yet others focus on the notions of religious experience and encounter, affirming all religions to be equally good means of encountering a divine transcendent reality.⁵

I take this recognition of the diversity of pluralist perspectives a little further, however. Indeed, I suggest there are a number of discrete paradigms of pluralism. Some are more obvious and well known; others are somewhat novel. I have discussed in detail elsewhere five variants that I have identified thus far.⁶ Let me here simply sketch the three sub-set categories into which these may be grouped.

The first comprises the standard definitional paradigms of pluralism, namely *Common Ground* and *Common Goal* pluralism. These two tend to predominate in any discussion of religious pluralism. The first views religious differences, or the variety of religions, as contextualised variable expressions of, or from, a ‘Universal Source’; the second holds that religious differences reflect the variety of salvific paths leading, or drawn, to, the ‘Universal Goal’. The fundamental ideas are clear – there is a ‘common ground’ of religious ‘reality’ from which the different religions of the world derive; or a

transformative ‘goal’ that is the end-point of all religions, even though it may be differently expressed (in concert with the narrative tradition within which each religion dwells uniquely) and differently attained (again in keeping with the unique transformative or salvific narrative of each religion).

The second paradigm set consists of an extreme definition of pluralism, namely that of *Radically Differentiated* pluralism which holds that religious differences signal an irreconcilable differentiation of religious identities. That is to say, there is no reasonable ground to assume a link across religions: their individual, particular, identities militate against any such linkage as inferred by the predominant paradigm-set of pluralism. What are conveniently called religions cannot be said to be variant examples of any single category in the first place. The attractiveness of this paradigm lies in its clear assertion of the individual identity and integrity of the religions.

A third sub-set of pluralism paradigms exists alongside the standard and the radical sets adumbrated above and, I suggest, it offers more fruitful ground for the sort of philosophical consideration that Byrne pursues. This is what I call the set of ‘interdependent’ paradigms, and there are again two variants, namely *Complementarity Holistic* and *Dynamic Parallel* pluralism. The former holds that religious differences may be discerned as complementary particular expressions which together comprise the ‘Universal Whole’. The plurality of religions yields the mutual complementarity of different parts together comprising a complex whole. The divine reality encountered and expressed variegatedly in and through different religions is not the One Reality behind religions, as it were, but the One Reality that is comprised by them all.

In similar fashion, *Dynamic Parallel* pluralism holds that religious differences reflect a parallelism of religious phenomena. The authenticity of religious phenomena is asserted without any haste to judge matters of validity or veracity. What then is observed as a result of analysis of presented data across religions is the presence of dynamic parallels of phenomena rather than substantive ‘sameness’. Religious plurality may then be interpreted in terms of dynamic parallels of religious intuition and response, for example. This yields a point of commonality that yet preserves the integrity of difference. Religions

are not variants of the same thing, but they may variably express parallel processes. The inference is that the reality of religion lies in the dynamic processes rather than the veracity or otherwise of commensurable substantives.

III

In his 1995 *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism* Peter Byrne aims to show that it is a realist perspective on religion that lies at the heart of religious pluralism.⁷ More recently he has addressed the issue of realism in respect to Christian theology wherein he concludes that theology cannot be interpreted realistically, or at least “be sensibly conceived to be a realist discipline”.⁸ My interest here is not with the later critique of theology but Byrne’s earlier concern with religious pluralism of which, in his recent work – and acknowledging the earlier – he states:

Religious diversity yields the fact that there are world religions with incompatible accounts of the divine. The fact seems to face philosophers of religion with a choice: either find some means of proving one such account to be more probable than the others, or produce a revised account of religious truth and certainty. Philosophers who espouse religious pluralism despair of the first alternative and embrace the second. Embracing the second involves accepting something like this: all (or most) world religions give partial, limited accounts of a religious ultimate whose true nature is hidden from them.⁹

This suggests that all (or most) religions refer in some degree or another – whether to an equal degree is another matter – to the same referent. What, then, is the nature of the referent?

Broadly speaking, realist perspectives view religions, and so religious language, as having an external real referent. By contrast anti-realism denies this in favour of a view that religion is a product of human imagining and shaped by human language: the referent of religion is apparent, not real. In relation to theology, for example, Byrne states the contrast sharply: “Can the

apparent intent behind talk of God to refer to an entity existing in some sense beyond us and the universe be taken seriously? The realist answers ‘yes’ and the anti-realist ‘no’.”¹⁰ Contemporary anti-realists such as Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering, for example, follow the earlier Wittgenstein in holding that religious language comprises but a meaningful game. However, there is no ‘Divine Reality’ as such that exists outside of human ken; no extra-mental independently existing Reality to which religion *per se* refers.

A religious fundamentalist, who tends to reflect an exclusivist mentality, avers just the opposite: God, or some equivalent ‘Divine Reality’, not only exists, but is the fullness of reality itself, and is directly described by the scriptural text and doctrinal formularies of the religion. This is the position of naïve realism. Other theists may wish to take a different tack, something which has been referred to as critical realism, that is to say, religion does indeed refer to an objective reality beyond human experience and conceptual construct, but the relationship between this reality and human language that refers to it needs to be critically assessed: symbolism, metaphor, and other linguistic modalities and conceptual typologies apply. It is more into this context that the earlier work of Byrne speaks.

Byrne seeks to propound the plausibility of pluralism, philosophically, by recourse to an exposition of referential realism, and he begins by acknowledging religious pluralism in terms of the standard definitional set I described above, namely as being concerned with the postulate of a “common object of reference for at least many of the worlds great religions”.¹¹ Following Janet Martin Soskice, Byrne asserts that it is in fact necessary for all major theistic traditions to refer to a common sacred, transcendent reality, and it is this that is at the heart of pluralism. “To distinguish itself from naturalism, (pluralism) must affirm that some sacred, non-human reality informs the religions even though no religion ever describes that reality adequately”, Byrne asserts.¹² Byrne utilises the terms ‘sacred’ and ‘transcendent’, where the former evokes an evaluative category and the latter an ontological one, to denote this reality.

The sacred is that which is conceived as being of the highest possible value and, on some conceptions, as the source of all value in the world. The transcendent is an object of reference whose reality is not exhaustively contained within the spatio-temporal and which, in consequence, is crucially unlike in certain respects ordinary objects of reference.¹³

Byrne argues that there must be, as a *minimal* point of pluralism, at least one common referent held within religions and this he names as the providing of “real contact with a single transcendent focus”.¹⁴ This does not entail equality in all respects, or the vitiating of evaluative comparison either across religions or with reference to component elements. Setting aside the paradigm of radical differentiation, it would seem that Byrne’s claim might hold. But he adds to this minimum

the element of scepticism or agnosticism with regard to the detailed dogmatic or mythical structure of any specific form of faith. The pluralist ... on reasoned grounds, doubts whether the detailed dogmatics of any particular religion can be known with sufficient certainty to enable [that particular] faith to be the means of interpreting human religion. ... pluralism must take its stand on a grand negative: there is not the certainty in any particular religion to enable its world-view to be the basis of a viable interpretation of religion.¹⁵

It is this, he says, that draws a boundary between pluralism and inclusivism. Putting together the notion of transcendent-sacred reality together with the interconnecting of human existence with that reality as the route to a salvific or transformative resolution, and adding in a stance of “agnosticism toward, and therefore disengagement from, the specifics of any confessional interpretation of religion”, Byrne arrives at three minimal elements of religious pluralism.

- (1) All major religious traditions are equal in respect of making common reference to a single transcendent, sacred reality.
- (2) All major traditions are likewise equal in respect of offering some means or other to human salvation.
- (3) All traditions are to be seen as containing revisable, limited accounts of the nature of the sacred: none is certain enough in its particular dogmatic formulations to provide the norm for interpreting the others.¹⁶

So far, so good. Clearly Byrne is taking a realist perspective – religion has to do, philosophically speaking, with ‘reality’: but of what sort? In his more recent work Byrne defines realism, in the context of theistic discourse, in terms of “the governing intent behind the concept of God ... to refer to an extra-mental, extra-mundane, transcendent entity”, but he acknowledges that “it is enormously difficult to attain clarity and agreement on what ‘transcendent entity’ means”.¹⁷ For Byrne it is realism which prevents the collapse of the subject–object relation: realism “enforces a gap between mind and reality. It must, then, prevent any elision of the distinction between the human mind and its conceptions, on the one hand, and God on the other”.¹⁸

Realism holds open the door to scepticism, the antidote to religious gullibility.¹⁹ Yet realism is not to be taken as presupposing the degree of apodicticity that the fundamentalist, for example, assumes. Says Byrne: “Realism is perfectly compatible with the recognition that our insight into reality is partial, limited and aspectual. Indeed, realism ... rests on the founding assumption that the world is in large measure not constituted by our representations of it”.²⁰ Realism in fact presupposes “that we live in a world which is largely ontologically and epistemically independent of us. How the world is is one thing; how we represent it to ourselves is another”.²¹

Pluralism, says Byrne, “shares realism with confessional interpretations of religion, but whereas their realism is partial (favouring some one tradition above others), pluralism’s is not”.²² That is to say, “Pluralism’s main assault on confessional accounts stresses the epistemological implausibilities in

exclusivism and inclusivism”.²³ That being so, what then is Byrne’s positive perspective on pluralism? He avers the importance of noting that

pluralism must define its commitment to the cultural basis of religious thought very carefully. It cannot, on the pain of incoherence, ally itself to any doctrine affirming that all thought, or all religious thought, is through and through culturally relative or determined. It needs instead an account of how religious thought is culturally *limited* and hence *relative to a degree*.²⁴

Thus the notion of a transcendent referent requires capacity of thought beyond the culturally limited; the notion of universal perspective inherent in pluralism presupposes a larger vista or capacity. Pluralism is not antithetical or inimical to religious commitment. It does not advocate the abandonment of faith. It is, rather, simply sceptical as to assertions of dogmatic detail.²⁵ This suggests to me that what I have identified as the set of interdependent paradigms of pluralism, in particular that of dynamic parallel pluralism, may in fact resonate better with Byrne’s analysis of pluralism than the standard paradigmatic set he presupposes. It is the parallelism of dynamic processes rather than any equation of data or positing of corresponding commonalities which is of the essence.

Byrne indeed argues that the fact of the same referential object holding across different systems of thought does not of itself require there to be agreement as to the description of the object. Thus, for religion, the attempt to simply “establish a thesis of common reference for the religions need not be defeated by the varied list of key features which have been applied to the transcendent in them”.²⁶ For example, there can be even fundamental differences holding “between personal and impersonal conceptions of the sacred” and, indeed, “further differences within each of these two families”.²⁷ At the same time, Byrne points out that there is “considerable overlap between different ... descriptions of the transcendent” which can actually “bring out the apparent major point of agreement across many traditions that there is a transcendent ground of reality which is the sum and source of value”.²⁸ In

regard to religion more widely, he avers that a pluralist realism is but “a matter of finding sufficient identifying description of the transcendent across traditions”.²⁹

In respect to alternatives to referential realism, Byrne points out that descriptive-reference simply begs the question of truth and leads to a “dominance of one tradition over others in articulating the common truth or reality”.³⁰ By contrast, pluralism must be detached from descriptive referentialism, or the descriptive theory of reference, “both because it does not provide an easy way of securing common reference in the face of cognitive conflicts between religions and because it promises an unfavourable account of the character of realism”.³¹ Byrne further makes the point that “if alleged identifying descriptions could be seen as referential not attributive, because they were facets of a gradual, fallible *process* of epistemic access to the sacred, divergence would not matter to the same degree”.³² This is a significant point and is suggestive, in my view, of the philosophical perspective that lies behind the dynamic parallel paradigm of pluralism, namely a phenomenological hermeneutic of religion wherein a distinction is made between *descriptive data* and the *embedded dynamic* such that the clue to the nature of what it is that the descriptive data refers to is indicated by the dynamic process contained within the narrative or action or whatever religious phenomenon that is the subject of attention. Thus we might say there is a two-level, or two-stage referential process, and any notion of the truth of the matter is found in respect to an analysis of the dynamics as well as the data of religion.

Byrne avers that “at its crudest a realist conception of religion states that there are real things corresponding to religious concepts”.³³ Whereas the non-realist holds there is no correspondence between common-sense concepts and the extra-mental existence of things corresponding to the concepts, realism holds there is a point of correspondence. The question is: what is the nature of the correspondence? For Byrne religious realism “is more properly a minimal realism, affirming that an extra-mental entity or state corresponds to the fundamental concepts of the focus of religion”.³⁴ Thus “realism in religion looks as if it ought to be the view that some religious concepts genuinely

correspond to transcendent entities and states. Put this way it is no more, and no less, than the view that there is a sacred, transcendent reality”.³⁵ Quite. But has the cause of arguing realism as congruent with pluralism been advanced?

For Byrne, a common referent can attract divergent descriptions and responses. This suggests more than simply variant descriptions of the one ‘thing’, be it ultimate ground or goal. Rather it suggests religions varyingly refer to a real ‘object’ or Reality. This is not that which is knowable directly through experience or observation, but indirectly, mediated through the responsive interactions which have formed religious narrative and discourse about that Reality. Thus the semantic aspect of religious realism is in the notion of ‘reference’ rather than ‘truth’. Byrne states: “It will be the idea of reference which establishes the cognitive contact between concepts and reality which in turn grounds a realist perspective on the way of thinking that embodies those concepts”.³⁶ And, indeed, reference to this reality is “a material practice in which true description plays but a small part – contexts, methods of investigation and causal links between speaker and object being primary”.³⁷ Furthermore, in regards to what Byrne calls minimal theistic realism, he argues that “not all of the concepts of a mode of discourse have to be taken to be referential (in intent or in fact) for it to be interpreted realistically”.³⁸ On the other hand, something can be “interpreted realistically although it is to a large extent false” and, furthermore, “strict or extensive truth in a mode of discourse is not a necessary condition for interpreting it realistically”.³⁹ How is this so?

Byrne holds that a statement is true “because it has an objective structure, because the appropriate referential relations hold between its parts and reality and because of the independent nature of that reality”.⁴⁰ Unlike the claim of Idealism, realism “suggests that the knower does not construct or constitute the thing known ... so it opens the possibility that knowledge may be hard to come by and that many of our statements about the world may not possess strict truth”.⁴¹ Thus for Byrne, referential realism

...allows for a middle path between, on the one hand, those who opt for rampant subjectivism in religion as the only means to save

ourselves from intolerant, authoritarian dogmatism and, on the other hand, those who think that strict truth must attach to the dogmas of some confession or other if we are not to fall into the pit of out and out relativism and non-cognitivism.⁴²

It seems to me that Byrne's advocacy of referential realism might resonate better with pluralism understood, as I have indicated above, in terms of the set of interdependent paradigms that involve notions of complementarity and dynamic parallels holding across religions. The point of comparative contact, then, is not a matter of substantive 'sameness' versus 'difference' with allied problems of truth and relativism. Byrne's discussion is limited to the extent that he is working within the framework of the standard predominant definitional set, namely *Common Ground* and *Common Goal* pluralisms. The assertion that "pluralism does *not* require all religions to offer the *same* account of salvation, merely that all religions must be alike in offering *some* means of relating salvifically to the sacred"⁴³ is a case in point where Byrne's argument arguably implies the dynamic parallelism interpretation of pluralism. Admittedly, in his more recent advocacy of relativism Byrne seems to have moved away from his earlier positive predisposition to pluralism. He cites relativism as a response to religious diversity and the "confrontation with the fact of diverse religious conceptual schemes" as an alternate view to both exclusivism and pluralism. Following J. Runzo, Byrne affirms that relativism

can avoid the exclusivist condemnation of rival traditions and conceptions of the divine. Yet it can also avoid the problems which come with pluralist responses to religious diversity. ... Pluralist responses involve interpreting each religion as speaking only of an 'image' of the divine, while postulating an unknown divine reality lying behind those images.⁴⁴

Furthermore, says Byrne, relativism

can close the gap between rival religious conceptual schemes and the divine by allowing differing sets of religious truth claims to be correct and each phenomenal focus to be real. Exclusivist responses to diversity are imperialistic. Pluralist responses are sceptical. Relativist responses are neither.⁴⁵

I wonder if the relativism Byrne advocates is not really a version of pluralism akin to the interdependent set of paradigms I have adumbrated. Byrne's use of relativism certainly contrasts with the standard paradigms I have identified, and it is this paradigmatic set which Byrne presumes – and now, apparently, rejects. Nevertheless, in my view Byrne's work on referential realism as the philosophical underpinning for religious pluralism has much to commend it. My contention is that referential realism, and its own corresponding pluralist truth-value, offers a philosophically sound framework for the comprehension and promotion of religious and cultural plurality as the *sine qua non* for human society in the 21st century.

¹ This paper is a reworked version of my 'Religious Plurality, Referential Realism and Paradigms of Pluralism' in Avery Plaw, ed., *Frontiers of Diversity: Explorations in Contemporary Pluralism*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2005, 191-209

² Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion*. London: Macmillan, 1995

³ *Ibid*, vii

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Douglas Pratt, 'Pluralism and Interreligious Engagement: The Contexts of Dialogue'. In David Thomas with Clare Amos, eds., *A Faithful Presence, essays for Kenneth Cragg*, London: Melisende Press, 2003, 402-418. See also: Douglas Pratt, 'Contextual Paradigms for Interfaith Relations'. *Current Dialogue*, No 42, December 2003, 3-9; – 'Universalising Rhetoric and Particularist Identities: Pluralism and the Future of Our Religious Pasts'. *International Journal in the Humanities*, Vol. 1, 2003/2004, 1347-1356

⁷ Byrne, *Prolegomena*, viii

⁸ Peter Byrne, *God and Realism*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, 178

⁹ *Ibid*, 72; cf. *Prolegomena*, 6

¹⁰ Byrne, *God and Realism*, 4

¹¹ Byrne, *Prolegomena*, ix

¹² *Ibid*, 39; cf. Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, Oxford, 1985, 149

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- ¹³ Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 39
¹⁴ *Ibid*, 5
¹⁵ *Ibid*, 6
¹⁶ *Ibid*, 12
¹⁷ Byrne, *God and Realism*, 6
¹⁸ *Ibid*, 71
¹⁹ Cf. *ibid*, 72, 77
²⁰ *Ibid*, 70
²¹ *Ibid*, 77
²² Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 17
²³ *Ibid*, 19, Note that for Byrne ‘confessional’ includes exclusivist and inclusivist accounts.
²⁴ *Ibid*, 22
²⁵ Cf. *ibid*, 26
²⁶ *Ibid*, 33
²⁷ *Ibid*
²⁸ *Ibid*
²⁹ *Ibid*, 35
³⁰ *Ibid*, 36
³¹ *Ibid*, 42
³² *Ibid*, 54
³³ *Ibid*, 167
³⁴ *Ibid*
³⁵ *Ibid*, 168
³⁶ *Ibid*, 173
³⁷ *Ibid*
³⁸ Byrne, *God and Realism*, 19
³⁹ Byrne, *Prolegomena*, 173
⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 174
⁴¹ *Ibid*
⁴² *Ibid*, 176
⁴³ *Ibid*, 85
⁴⁴ Byrne, *God and Realism*, 70. Cf. J. Runzo, *World Views and Perceiving God*, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1993, 207-8
⁴⁵ *Ibid*