

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Related exam questions:

- 'The degree to which different religions may be rendered consistent with one another is inversely proportional to how much they actually say.' Discuss. (2000/12)
- Must the religious pluralist treat all beliefs as equally valuable? What would be the cost of doing so? (2001/12)
- Do all monotheists worship the same God? (2002/10)
- Can there be good reasons for preferring one religion to another? (2003/2)
- 'People believe what they think they believe; so if the adherents of different religions think that they are worshipping different Gods, then they are.' Discuss. (2004/12)
- 'If I had been born in a different time and place I would likely have held a different religion.' Does this make it irrational for me to hold the religion I do? (2005/13)
- How can you tell whether two people believe in the same God? (2006/12)
- Can we be justified in following one religion if we are unable to disprove all the others? (2006/13)
- Must all monotheists worship the same God? (2007/13)
- There are millions of rational, intelligent, morally earnest and sincere Hindus. If asked why they are Hindus, they would give reasons similar in broad ways to those Christians give for being Christians (tradition, experience, authoritative books, etc). Does this fact affect the rationality of or justification for being a Christian? (2009/11)
- One's religious beliefs are not independent of one's cultural milieu or family background. Should this fact lower your confidence in your current religious beliefs (or lack thereof)? (2011/16)
- 'Irresolvable disagreements in the area of religious belief intellectually undermine belief in a particular religion.' Discuss. (2012/3)
- 'In matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary; and it is impossible the religions of ancient Rome, of Turkey, of Siam, and of China should, all of them be established on any solid foundation.' (HUME) Is this impossible? (2013/15)
- Being brought up among British atheists, you probably would always have been an atheist. Being brought up among American evangelicals, you probably would always have been a Christian. Should these observations affect anyone's confidence that their atheist beliefs are true? (2014/1)

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Religious diversity poses two distinct problems for anyone who isn't an atheist or agnostic. First, religious diversity can easily be portrayed as a defeater of any type of religious belief. Given that there is a bewildering variety of logically and ethically incompatible religious systems, and assuming that there is one true denomination, it is easy to conclude that our cognitive system is extremely unreliable in terms of tracking supernatural truths. If only one denomination's beliefs are correct, then most religious people are grossly mistaken about the nature of the supernatural (since any specific denomination comprises only a minority of all religious people), which appears to be evidence that the "supernatural module" of the human mind does not work very well. But since this reasoning goes through whichever denomination one singles out as the allegedly true one, it seems that there is no ground (apart from tradition and dogma) for taking any specific denomination to be the true one.

There are two classic responses to this problem, exclusivism and pluralism. Exclusivists maintain that there is one true religion and members of other faiths are simply wrong as far as supernatural beliefs are concerned. Pluralists, on the other hand, argue that different religions can be equally correct in some sense. One way to make this idea coherent is to adopt an anti-realist stance on which "facts" about the supernatural are to some extent of our own making. Another way to make pluralism work is to offer a syncretistic theory on which different religions all agree on some fundamental level and they turn out to represent the same supernatural reality. (A famous recent proponent of such a view is John Hick; see below.) Exclusivists tend to argue that both anti-realism and syncretism entail that most or all ordinary religious beliefs are all false, and hence the pluralist is not much better off than the exclusivist: she is also a revisionary when it comes to the truth content of the world's religions.

The second challenge that religious diversity poses is the need to explain why a morally perfect and omnipotent God would bring it about that most of her creatures have false beliefs about her. (This problem may also affect non-monotheistic religions, but I'll stick to the monotheistic context, because the philosophy of religion is dominated by it.) What is the providential role of false religions?

There is a very simple fundamentalist answer to this question: adherents of false religions will probably end up in hell, because that's how God ordained it. Few people are willing to defend this position; a notorious example is William Lane Craig.

Some relevant readings:

John Hick: "Religious pluralism and salvation"

An intro to Hick's syncretistic theology. Hick's main claim is that religion in general serves the purpose of turning people from being self-centred into being "Reality-centred" by putting them in touch with "the Real", a noumenal ultimate reality that inspires virtuous behaviour. Given that this is religion's core function, different religious systems can be equally adequate. Hick also thinks that the Real in itself is beyond human comprehension (he invokes Kantian concepts to flesh this out), and so different religious systems can be equally true (they capture how the Real appears to different communities).

Paul Eddy: "Religious pluralism and the divine: Another look at John Hick's Neo-Kantian proposal"

Argues that Hick's concept of the Real is ultimately empty and his theory collapses into some sort of anti-realism or social constructivism about religious claims.

Alvin Plantinga: "Pluralism" (excerpt from his *Warranted Christian Belief*)

A concise and forceful defense of exclusivism. Plantinga believes that acquiring Christian beliefs through religious experience or religious education is sufficient ground for being a rational Christian, and only atheists or agnostics can take the facts of religious pluralism to be defeaters of theistic belief.

Andrew Koehl: "Reformed epistemology and diversity"

A more detailed analysis of how "reformed epistemology", that is, Plantinga's theory of rational Christian belief, can (allegedly) defeat the challenge of diversity.

David Basinger: "Hick's religious pluralism and reformed epistemology"

Basinger claims that Plantingan exclusivists should feel compelled to give some rational explanation of their continued adherence to their faith in the face of religious diversity.

William Lane Craig: "No other name"

A fundamentalist reply to the challenge of pluralism. Craig argues that God, being omniscient, knows of people's free choices in advance (this is called "middle knowledge" for some obscure Mediaeval reason). Members of false religions are people who would have been damned anyway even if they had received the message of Christ.

William Alston: "Religious experience and perceptual knowledge of God"

Alston takes a second look at his theory of religious experience, and he argues that diversity does not make it irrational to believe in one specific religious system on the basis of religious experience but it does diminish the evidential force of such experiences.