Making Sense of Pluralism, March 2016

Did you ever notice how eagerly we celebrate being different from others, but how reluctant we are to celebrate them being different from us? It defies logic. World War II hero Douglas MacArthur said the most dangerous question in the world is "why can't everyone be more like me?" The question is particularly deadly as the 21st century pulls the world's inhabitants closer together in proximity and pushes them farther apart in religious loyalty. Humans must relinquish their hope for some unified or purified belief system, and face the reality of religious diversity. Tolerance is no longer enough; we need respectful engagement. I will propose a form of religious pluralism that responds to diversity with three vital elements missing from the popular discussion. Call them the three R's of inter-faith dialogue: *reason, respect, and realism*.

To embrace diversity we must first understand that sameness is a liability – a fleeting comfort that time will erode. In politics as in religion, the pursuit of genuine diversity exacts an early price but pays dividends in the long term. Allowing many competing factions and principles is painful but crucial to a functioning democracy. Even the totalitarian regime in China appoints political adversaries to key government positions to guard against corruption and cronyism. In early America, the separation of church and state won support because it fostered religious diversity by preventing any single church from gaining excessive power. The alternative was evident in Europe where, as Robert Ingersoll remarked, "the throne skulked behind the altar."

The same is true in biology. Two decades ago, the Florida panther was nearly extinct with a population of 30. In a last-ditch effort to save the panther, biologists brought in eight females from a different subspecies of panther in Texas. Strange as they may have looked to their Florida cousins, they were soon assimilated into the gene pool. This helped counteract the inbreeding that concentrates recessive genes in small populations. Those eight cats made a disproportionate difference. Genetic variation increased, overall health improved, and the panther population tripled.

To William James, the problem of unity and diversity was "the most pregnant of all the dilemmas of philosophy." It gave birth to Mormonism, to cite one example. My great, great uncle Joseph Smith was so bewildered by the proliferation and variety of churches, that he beheld a vision telling him to renounce all religions and start a new one. He translated the Book of Mormon from gold tablets he allegedly unearthed in upstate New York. I did not inherit his skill with a shovel, so I've resorted to rummaging through the refuse of history. The exercise persuades me that variety is a blessing not a predicament. Any religion, if allowed to rise to a position of dominance, will suppress new ideas and oppress the dissident. This happened with Catholicism in medieval Europe, Calvinism in colonial New England, and Mormonism in territorial Utah. The Protestant Reformation demonstrated how readily the open quest for truth can collapse into a fierce defense of dogma. As Arthur Clarke implored, "Bring me into the company of those who seek the truth, and deliver me from those who have found it."

Diversity not only resists the concentration of power; it supplies the engine for learning. As an analogy, GPS relies on a constellation of orbiting satellites to establish any location on earth.

The broadcast positions and clock times, transmitting at the speed of light from at least 4 satellites, allow the GPS receiver to solve for its latitude, longitude, altitude, and signal arrival time. Extra satellites improve reliability and accuracy (in all, the U.S. system has 32). Similarly, the search for truth relies on many external viewpoints. In order to figure out *your* position you must know *theirs*, even though none of them suffices by itself. If any of them is in *obvious* error, you can turn to backup viewpoints. But *slight* errors are unavoidable and motion is unstoppable, so your answers are never certain or permanent.

Pluralism is one response to diversity that acknowledges partial truth in many conflicting belief systems, but concludes that none of these encompasses the whole truth. Does this mean there *cannot be* a single truth, even in moral matters? A leading pluralist spokesman, British philosopher John Hick, said it may be possible to see the story of the great world faiths as "the history of man's most persistent illusion." But he was an Anglican driven to reconcile diversity with his own faith (and perhaps ease the survivor's guilt that haunts many thoughtful Christians). So he explained the variety of religions as an ever-evolving reaction to "divine self-revelation to mankind." Hick proposed that morals and aspirations common to all religions are divinely infused and unfiltered, while he attributed the more diverse creeds and rituals to human interpretations shaped by history and culture.

Those who agree with Hick fall into a category of pluralism I will call the *mystical* strain. It depicts a two-tier universe, exalting the mysterious over the mundane. Hick stated, "The God whom our … thoughts can circumnavigate is merely a finite and partial image." Still, he held that the divine speaks in equally valid ways to all the world's major religions. In other words, we cannot wrap our minds around God, but the same God has wrapped his arms around all of us. In a similar vein UU minister Forrest Church used the analogy of one light and many windows to symbolize a single source of the holy, viewed or interpreted differently by each religion.

A refined pluralism, which I will call the *pragmatic* strain, agrees that divine reality is too big to fully grasp and no religion has a monopoly on revealed truth. But it does not assign equal merit to all interpretations, nor does it presume they all draw from the same source. Philosopher Joseph Runzo observed, "Evidence supports the conclusion that all humankind does not share the same innate concept or primal experience of Ultimate Reality." The word "pragmatic" means practical, or "down to earth." This brand of pluralism favors beliefs that advance human dignity and human outcomes. It pictures a one-tier universe where the sacred is embedded in everyday experience (as Jesus said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is among you"). James exemplified this perspective. In <u>The Varieties of Religious Experience</u> he conveyed the sincerity of religious believers with utmost reverence, but he measured the truth of their religion by the goodness it brought to this world – by its "fruits for life."

Mystical pluralists envision a shared source of religious beliefs as the means to escape conflict. But John Dewey said the avoidance of conflict is "a hopeless and self-contradictory ideal." Pragmatic pluralists understand how avoiding conflict creates new conflict, often worse than

the one we shun. They don't merely tolerate diverse belief systems; they advocate them, as long as they don't stifle individual conscience or threaten the public good. But diversity denotes mixture, an intermingling of dissimilar ingredients. Tight religious enclaves do not qualify as diversity any more than ghettos surrounded by gated communities, or for that matter, two subspecies of panthers that never mate. Authentic diversity requires *earnest exchange and discord.* A free market of ideas invigorates inter-faith dialogue, sometimes achieving mutual understanding and even convergence, but never consensus.

Mystical pluralism poses some philosophical difficulties. Paradoxically, it places all religious perspectives on the same plane, but implies that it has a more complete explanation than the rest. Mystical pluralists admit that Ultimate Reality is beyond human comprehension, yet insist that it motivates all religion. How can they acknowledge the fallibility of divergent religious claims and still trust the underlying revelation? To invoke a familiar fable, how do they know the six blind men are all touching the same elephant if pluralists can see no better?

Mystical pluralism also raises ethical issues. First, for the sake of common ground it trivializes the unique content of each religion. It ignores the reality that for most people, religious values acquire substance and urgency only in the context of their *particular* faith. That is why pragmatic pluralists take specific beliefs and those who espouse them seriously. Second, mystical pluralism ties the meaning of life and the possibility of redemption to a vague connection to the transcendent (your misfortune if you don't feel it). Pragmatic pluralism regards the value of a human life as foundational not conditional, neither bestowed nor withheld by a divine power. Columbia University Professor Philip Kitcher wrote, "By treating human ethical life as a peculiar projection from an allegedly higher realm, human beings and their problems become subordinated to something supposedly vaster and greater." In my mind, a higher authority might as easily excuse cruelty as encourage charity. How many religions have forged God's signature to justify bigotry, polygamy, or slavery?

Let me illustrate pragmatic pluralism with a less provocative subject like human diet. Here, then, are the principles of dietary pluralism:

- we recognize that diet is largely an accident of geography and culture
- we prefer our own tastes over anyone else's, but we extend the same privilege to others
- we allow that different dietary regimens can produce perfectly healthy people
- we do not enjoy food any less just because our tastes are not shared by everyone
- we may sample and appreciate an unfamiliar food, possibly adopting it into our diet
- we do not concede equal value to a diet proven unhealthy by any objective measure

The food metaphor may sound absurd considering that religions differ on profound questions like meaning and mortality. But strife between religious factions may owe less to the gravity of their beliefs than to the personal offense inflicted by disagreement. Paul Tillich said the

differences that drive religious conflict are "existential, not theoretical." The pragmatic pluralist takes this to heart. It's ok to dispute people's theology, but do *not* demean their humanity.

Religious differences can serve as a proxy for cultural and economic tensions. In the clash between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, history and injustice supply the explosives; religion is merely the detonator. In Gulliver's Travels, Jonathan Swift mocked people's penchant for turning the smallest difference into hostile aggression. The Lilluputians, tiny in stature and tinier in wisdom, went to war with their neighbors over the proper way to break a hardboiled egg. Swift's satire was inspired by escalating skirmishes between Protestant England and its Catholic neighbor, France. If religion triggered the fighting, might a pluralist mindset have defused it?

Pluralists belong to a distinct minority. Other responses to religious diversity include atheism, relativism, and exclusivism. Atheists generally declare all religion to be fantasy. Relativists view all religions as true, each within its own framework. Exclusivists claim *their* religion is true and all others are mistaken. Do these responses satisfy the three-R standard? Exclusivism is suspect on all counts. The New Atheists are ultra-rational, but they ridicule faith and delude themselves that the world could thrive without traditional religion (a dream shared by humanists).

Relativism is respectful, but it fragments reality by relegating truth to the mind of the beholder. How was the Catholic doctrine of an earth-centered universe *not* an illusion? How was human sacrifice by the Aztecs *not* reprehensible? Relativists may respond with Einstein's theory of Special Relativity, which renders certain statements true in one reference frame but false in another. I would counter that the same physical laws still govern both reference frames. What changes between them is the measurement, not the thing being measured. Relativism is also naïve in its aim to improve inter-faith relations. By its own theory, if you and I belong to different religions I cannot enter your reality, nor can you enter mine. What's more, since we're both already right we have no incentive to try.

In a regrettable irony, exclusivism speaks for most of the world. It represents thousands of religions, united only in their conviction that everyone else is wrong. Renowned Notre Dame Professor Alvin Plantinga contends that exclusivists need not submit to common rules of discourse. Their beliefs spring from conscience, which insulates them from public contestability. Nonetheless, he asserts that exclusivism is not intellectually dishonest or egotistical. "Only when it excludes, without sanction by some universal court of appeal, the dignity or worth of other humans, does it become egotistical and dangerous." Notice that Plantinga empowers this *universal* court of appeal (i.e., reason) to arbitrate human worth, but not to settle doctrinal questions (which he exempts from scrutiny). In one slip of the pen he has summed up my argument: civilization needs agreement only on what matters most.

Of course, Plantinga has little use for pluralism. In one essay he fades from philosopher to preacher: "Religious pluralism is a manifestation of our miserable human condition; and it may deprive us of some of the comfort and peace the Lord has promised his followers." I find

nothing offensive about this indictment of pluralism. After all, misery is inherent to the human condition, and the more exclusive brands of faith seem to offer an effective antidote.

I do, however, object to the exclusivist's retreat from rational exchange. Taking sanctuary in private truth will only cloud mutual understanding and aggravate differences. Getting into the mind of one's opponent usually demystifies and softens those differences. In that spirit, here is my reply to exclusivism:

1. We observe many conflicting religious belief systems, most of whose literal claims are necessarily false (exclusivists would certainly agree)
2. These conflicting claims have at least one quality in common: whether revealed, inscribed, or merely felt, they rest on an authority unaccountable to reason or verifiable evidence (Plantinga admits that he has no argument that would convince a dissenter)
3. Since conflicting religious claims are founded on similar methods of inquiry, the *methods themselves* come into question, totally apart from the truth of such claims
4. If a particular religious belief system happens to be valid, it is only by coincidence since contradictions among rival beliefs arise from the same unreliable methods (I think Plantinga would agree, since he places all mutually exclusive belief systems on equal epistemological footing, meaning they employ similar ways of "knowing")
5. Given this unreliability, pluralism allows that all religions possess some measure of truth, but regards with suspicion any religion claiming to possess the whole truth

Plantinga argues that a sincerely held belief, even if unsupported by evidence, is entirely within one's intellectual and moral prerogative. He has stated, "The secrets of the human heart are hard to fathom." I don't disagree. But even harder to fathom is the thought of a single secret, residing only in the hearts of God's elite, that leads to eternal bliss.

What are the chances that humans even possess the faculties to overhear the gods or surprise their secrets (in the words of George Eliot)? Being agnostic, I'll guess one in a thousand. Now let's assume, as Plantinga implies, that the 4,200 religions in the world espouse equally tenable points of view. Then the probability that religion "X" is right and all others are wrong is one in 70,000. Maybe I've underestimated the reach of human insight. Let's raise the odds that humans can apprehend Ultimate Reality, from one in 1,000 to one in 100. It may seem counterintuitive, but this destroys any possibility that religion "X" has the exclusive truth. Why? The greater the probability that Ultimate Truth is discoverable, the lower the probability that only *one* religion would have discovered it. As Jean Bodin expressed, "Each is refuted by all."

This doesn't mean the literal claims of all religions are irrational, only that they are improbable. The legendary mathematician Pascal saw the acceptance of Christian doctrine as quite rational, even if it was a long shot. He wagered that a slim chance at eternal life with God is worth the inconsequential risk of believing incorrectly. Conversely, the desire for accurate beliefs does not warrant even a slight risk of suffering forever in Hell. Pascal's line of reasoning may have

evolved for human survival. Better to mistake the wind in the grass for a lion, than to mistake a lion for the wind (Anonymous).

In summary, the exclusivist consecrates the content of a religious belief, the mystical pluralist consecrates the source (discounting the content), and the pragmatic pluralist consecrates the believer. While mystical pluralism alleviates the self-importance of exclusivism, it attempts to reconcile diversity by minimizing difference, essentially uniting humankind by dividing reality. Forty years ago John Hick boldly predicted this view might "eventually render obsolete the sense of belonging to rival ideological communities."

Pragmatic pluralism sees the goal of reconciliation as impractical and undesirable. Instead, it seeks mutual respect, communicated through a reciprocal openness to differences. It finds meaning in a diversified humanity and a unified reality. The German prodigy Leibniz described the best possible world as the one that yields the greatest variety of phenomena governed by the simplest set of principles. Imagine a diverse society committed to the simple (albeit difficult) principles of honesty and human dignity. With these baseline values in common, pluralism might succeed in defining the collective good amid profound moral disagreement. At present Americans struggle just to rank *shared* goals like liberty, security, equality, and prosperity, say nothing of resolving divisive issues like gay marriage, euthanasia and abortion.

Pragmatic pluralism honors the three-R standard by conceding to people of all faiths, (1) the possibility (subject to honest debate) that they hold valid beliefs, (2) the legitimacy of their right to believe, and (3) the durability and productivity of their belief system. In strategic doses this has the potential to inoculate a world torn by sectarian hatred and violence. Susan Jacoby said, "We won't rid the world of revealed religion, but we can neutralize its destructive tendencies."

Ideally, this kind of pluralism cycles from conflict to dialogue to moderation to cooperation. It requires that *attitudes* rather than viewpoints be compatible. Diana Eck of the Harvard Divinity School says it demands give and take, criticism and self-criticism (words we don't normally associate with pluralism). It is not just tolerance, but "the active pursuit of understanding across lines of difference." It is not relativism, but "the encounter of commitments."

For Unitarian Universalism, this encounter walks a thin line between confrontation and capitulation. We pride ourselves on being inclusive, but our message is muddled and muffled by a nebulous pluralism. A more disciplined pluralism would let us welcome diversity without compromising the one legacy that sets UU apart: integrity of mind and heart. In the face of collective discovery, *truth* will always be tentative, but I hope our *commitment* to it will not. Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "The highest courage is to stake everything on a premise that you know tomorrow's evidence may disprove." We must find the courage to stand for truth *and* the humility to stand corrected. Our motto should be: Don't leave your argument at the door, but leave the door open to a better argument.