

# Coherentism and the Problem of Plurality: Justifying Religious Belief in the Face of Arbitrariness

## **Project Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to explore epistemological attitudes about the role of choice in the development of religious belief and argue against a coherentist view on the grounds that it cannot overcome objections raised by relativism.

## **Project Importance**

The reality of religious diversity presents a number of questions to philosophers of religion and religious epistemology. In light of the diverse and often conflicting systems of religious belief that exist, it becomes difficult justify the claim that only one religion is the most correct to believe (never mind whether one's own religion is the most correct). Pluralism is an increasingly popular view that provides a solution, but it borders on relativism. Religious pluralism in particular may be considered a form of both epistemic relativism and moral relativism. In the world today, people seem to be growing more and more sympathetic to moral and cultural relativism. However, it takes little effort to prove that relativism in any form is a rationally untenable stance. I wish to address the problems, both actual and potential, that result or may result from a wide acceptance of relativism.

## **Project Overview**

The question driving my project is: what is the role of choice in the appraisal of justification? Religious belief is just one mode of exploring this question. When presented

with two mutually exclusive but equally coherent systems of religious belief, the issue is that each system justifies itself. Each system is complete and designed to contain itself, and perhaps each one answers questions that the other cannot. So, how is one to determine which of these systems is correct in a non-arbitrary way? It would seem to come down to a choice, but does the act of choosing to believe something constitute knowledge, or is it more like wishful thinking? Is this what we define as faith? I intend to explore all these questions and more in my thesis.

This project stems from a paper I wrote on religious pluralism for Dr. Nathan Rockwood's epistemology class. The paper was an evaluation of and response to papers by Alvin Plantinga and Julian Willard. I will continue to engage with their writings on the subject and expand my research to other authors as well.

Some responses to the issue of religious diversity involve denying that there is any concrete truth to the matter: either there is no supernatural reality whatsoever, or religious truth is purely relative and therefore incompatible belief systems can all be equally true. Solutions like these will not concern us. We want to get at what justifies the belief that a particular religion is not only true but the most true, assuming that there is in fact some reality making it so. This stance, which seems to be the stance of most people with religious convictions, is referred to as religious exclusivism. Religious pluralism is a popular non-exclusivist position, as it not only rejects the superiority of any one religious perspective but asserts positive and equal epistemic values for multiple perspectives.

Plantinga disputes some of these attitudes in *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000) and seeks to show that not even religious pluralism provides a defeater for belief in Christianity, and he ultimately appeals to religious experience. He says that the only way

someone can be rationally charged with arbitrariness is if she admits that she has no special source of knowledge unique to Christianity—a *sensus divinitatus*, say—but why should she admit this? The belief in a privileged epistemic position need not be *true*, after all; it need only be *held* by the believer. And as long as she believes she has something extra, something special, lending credence to her beliefs, she is justified in believing that those who do not share her beliefs are simply missing the special information or belief-forming faculties necessary to arrive at the truth. The non-believer's own *sensus divinitatus* must not be functioning properly, for example, and so his beliefs are not warranted. Therefore, an exclusivist position is justified.

Willard addresses Plantinga's argument in "Plantinga's Epistemology of Religious Belief and the Problem of Religious Diversity" (2003), arguing that an externalist position such as Plantinga's is not sufficient to solve all the problems presented by religious pluralism. His criticism is that although Plantinga's theory seeks to describe what really does happen, not what is true in theory, nor what should happen, his assessment of what really does happen is inaccurate. For Plantinga, it appears that "the question, *Should* religious believers give up their religious belief in response to an awareness of religious plurality? is epistemologically equivalent to the question, *Do* religious believers give up their religious belief in the face of an awareness of religious plurality?" (Willard 282). While Plantinga's answer to the question is that religious adherents tend to *attack* the epistemic position of non-believers, Willard sets about to show that the more common intellectual activity among religious adherents in response to pluralism is to *posit* the elevated status of their own beliefs. And not only is positive argumentation what does happen, it is what *should*

happen, because any argument based on undermining the rational capabilities of others is subject to *ad hominem* criticisms.

I will expand on this discussion by introducing a wider perspective including classifications of both of these theories (and others I find in my research) according to coherentism and foundationalism, taking a closer look at Plantinga's (and others') discussion of arbitrariness, and using these points to form an argument against religious pluralism insofar as it is conducive to relativism.

### **Thesis Committee**

*Faculty Advisor:* Dr. Nathan Rockwood, Department of Philosophy.

This thesis originated with a paper I wrote for Dr. Rockwood's class on epistemology. Dr. Rockwood teaches classes on both epistemology and the philosophy of religion, so he will know how to direct my research and help me develop my ideas in a way that engages with preeminent and contemporary literature on such topics.

*Faculty Reader:* Dr. David Jensen, Department of Philosophy.

Dr. Jensen teaches on a variety of topics, including philosophical writing. Dr. Jensen has worked as both a faculty advisor and a committee member in the past, so he is in a position to help me write the thesis in the appropriate way and develop my ideas on the subject matter.

*Department Honors Coordinator:* Dr. Joseph Parry, Department of Philosophy.

With a history of close involvement with the Honors program and as someone familiar with both my writing and thinking styles, Dr. Parry will offer valuable feedback and perspectives at each stage of the development of my thesis.

## **Project Timeline**

May 3<sup>rd</sup> – Submit thesis proposal

May-October – Research, develop, and edit thesis while regularly consulting with committee members

November 1<sup>st</sup> – Submit preliminary draft of thesis and thesis defense information form

December – Defend thesis

December 6<sup>th</sup> – Submit final draft of thesis

## **Culminating Experience**

I may submit a truncated version of my thesis for publication in *Aporia*, BYU's journal of philosophy. If this does not fulfill the publication requirements for the thesis, I will continue to inquire about other opportunities for presentation and/or publication.