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What attitude should we take towards religious beliefs we do not share? In religious studies some maintain that a scholarly detachment is essential, and others that only a committed believer can really understand a faith; some that our obligation is to bring faiths closer together, and others that it is only to the truth. In this paper I speak as a believer to believers, to consider our proper attitude towards other faiths.²

Even to classify the various positions on this issue would be an immense task. It might initially seem that there would be only two: what I shall call *exclusivism*, maintaining that there is only one true religion; and *universalism*, acknowledging that truth is to be found in many. However there is a spectrum of views. At one end is the claim I shall call *strong exclusivism*, that there is not only one truth but also one salvation: "We are the only way. Those outside our faith face damnation." Next there is *weak exclusivism*: that there is only one true faith (perhaps with many approximations), but more than one path to salvation. Of this there are many forms: e.g. "God may save the ignorant, but once people hear our faith they must accept it to be saved"; or, more moderately, "Other faiths may also lead to salvation; but ours is the true/the God-given/the supreme one."

Beyond these are non-exclusivist positions. "Each great faith is normally best for those brought up in it." Or: "All faiths are equally valid, even those we might think obnoxious or crazy." Beyond these again are views which reject any religion as having the full truth. There is universalism in the strict sense: "We need a new synthesis which eliminates the idiosyncracies of the existing faiths."³ Or, nearer to pure relativism: "Religious claims have no truth-values, i.e. are not literally true or false." From the latter it seems a logically short - if emotionally long - step to atheist or agnostic positions, which reject religion altogether as false or unknowable.

At least as important as this, however, is a certain range of attitudes. These centre on the question of how far believers anticipate that they might have some truth to learn from other faiths, and how far they see their task as merely to convey the truth to others. These attitudes roughly, but only roughly, parallel the previous classification. While it is natural for strong exclusivists to expect to learn little, and for non-exclusivists to expect much, variations on that pattern are to be found.

In my discussion I shall look first at what I judge to be the main challenge today to exclusivism (Sec.2), then at its reply (Sec.3), and shall then take the issues further.

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Analogous to the above distinction between the formal classification and the attitudes held, we might again distinguish between a purely intellectual challenge to exclusivism and the experiential impact of actual situations. These cannot be sharply distinguished. Still it is one thing for a consideration to bear logically on a viewpoint, and another thing for it actually to bite.

The heart of the purely intellectual challenge, as I see it, is as follows.

However much and however rightly we emphasize our capacity for reflection and criticism, we can hardly deny that our systematic knowledge, and our whole picture of the world, is basically transmitted to us by our culture. We first receive it, and at best can only later reflect on it. And the more deeply a set of beliefs is embedded in our received picture, the more difficult it is to bring them up for re-examination. All this I shall refer to as our "cultural conditioning". Such conditioning can surely hardly be denied, but it can easily be overlooked.

Now particularly in relation to deeply embedded beliefs, the normal source of disagreement with other people is our respective cultural conditioning, i.e. that we have each received different beliefs that we have so far found acceptable. It would in general seem plausible to suggest that in such cases, neither of us should assume in advance of discussion that we happen to have received the correct ones; and that any reasonable settlement of the issue, insofar as it can or need be achieved, will at least involve first understanding the other's viewpoint.

We might add that, for reasons we shall later discuss (cf. especially Sec.6), it is often difficult for people to take such a detached attitude, particularly towards deeply embedded and cherished beliefs. It is therefore not uncommon for them to reject other beliefs as wrong, silly or perverse, rather than seriously trying to understand and investigate them. An analogous though more subtle point arises concerning the *degree* of consideration given. It is easy to reject other views after a merely cursory examination, of a sort which would justifiably arouse our angry protest if ours, in turn, were to be summarily dismissed in this way. Yet all such rejections would seem to be rationally unjustified.

This cultural conditioning would seem to apply universally, from our science to our cooking habits, and including of course our religion. Hence, it would seem, they should all in principle be open to re-examination. Yet this presents a crucial challenge to religious exclusivism. There are in religion many systems of belief; more than any ordinary person could adequately understand, let alone test, in a lifetime. Virtually no religious believers have even attempted the impossible task of first examining them all before they embrace their own. How can they then claim to know their own to be *the* truth? So - the challenge runs - exclusivism is nothing but a manifestation of that common attitude which judges before it adequately investigates. And this is, literally, pre-judgment or prejudice.

So much for the purely intellectual challenge. What may give it bite, as an actual felt experience in the life of a believer, is another question. For most it does not in fact bite at all, and when it does the causes may no doubt be varied. However the commonest is likely to be, I think, that of coming into serious contact with people who believe differently to ourselves. So long as others - whether of a different faith or none - are a mere "they" with whom "we" have no contact, the situation is not so pressing. When we take them seriously as human beings, the problems begin.

Consider, for example, some devout Christian students living in a university college. Their faith provides strength in their difficulties, joy both in fellowship and in individual prayer, and the overall framework of understanding for their lives. Now suppose there arrive some equally devout Muslim students from overseas. The Christians see this as an opportunity: perhaps

the Holy Spirit might eventually use them to convert the newcomers? As a first step they set out to become friends. Friendship gradually leads to better understanding. They find that the Muslim students' faith provides *their* strength in *their* difficulties, *their* joy both in fellowship and in individual prayer, and the overall framework of understanding for *their* lives.

Now an awareness of cultural conditioning is apt to occur. At one level the Christians have distinctive Christian reasons for being Christian, while the Muslims have quite different ones for being Muslim. But beneath this they may begin to see a deeper level. Why are the Christians Christian? Above all, because they were *presented* with the gospel. They were born in a Christian country; they came in contact with Christian influences (of Church, family, etc.); by one path or another they found in Christ the answer to life and so accepted the Christian viewpoint, *including* the distinctive reasons for it; and their faith now proves itself in their lives. Every word of *that* statement is as true *mutatis mutandis* for the Muslim students as it is for them. Hence the encounter is apt to lead to a realization that if they had been born in a Muslim country, they would probably have been Muslims; if they had been born in India they would probably have been Hindus; and similarly that if they are Christians this is in some fundamental sense largely due to being born into a Christian environment.

This makes it increasingly difficult to accept strong exclusivism, that there is only one path to salvation.⁴ For it seems implausible that salvation could with any justice depend on the accident of being born in a country where we will be nurtured in the truth faith. However, it is not in fact likely to remove exclusivism as such, but only to lead to some weakened form.⁵ Yet there is a challenge even to the weakest. For if we accept the cultural conditioning of all beliefs, then: firstly is it likely that, among all the devoutly believed faiths, just one - and how fortunately ours! - is *the* truth; and secondly, how could we know this without having attempted the impossible task of first knowing them all?

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The exclusivist will respond, no doubt, in many different ways. But there seems to be something we might call the general form of all or most answers, a structure which they have in common.⁶ It centres, I think, on the notion of revelation. We claim, exclusivists would say, to have a revelation. This means precisely that its source is God (or however the Ultimate is named), rather than, e.g., cultural conditioning. No doubt we can be asked how we know this *is* a revelation, and there will be deep differences about how and how far that can be answered. Yet if we have a revelation, then, since God cannot contradict Himself, we can know that whatever conflicts with it is false. So we can know it to be true despite our cultural conditioning and despite whatever we do *not* know - about other faiths or about anything else.

There is nothing formally wrong with the logic of this reply, but it merely raises rather than settles the deepest issues. How do we know we are not merely socially conditioned into taking this to be a revelation? Why should not God or the Ultimate reveal Him/Itself more than once, with complementary rather than conflicting revelations? How could we justify our claim to be *the* revelation, without *comparing* it to apparently rival claims, and hence

without knowing them as well as our own? Before we can tackle such questions (see Sec. 4 *et seq*) we must first, I think, look more closely at the notion of revelation.

Even in higher religions revelation takes many forms: experiences of being addressed which are then proclaimed as "thus saith the Lord"; historical events which are interpreted as divine action; individuals who are taken to be divine incarnations; and scriptures taken to be the divine wisdom of sages. Further there are the myths and practices of what we call primal religions. Perhaps "revelation" stands for a cluster of related concepts, with no single feature common to all. Yet there is one point which for the exclusivist is fundamental. I shall put it by saying that to call something revelation is to accord it *authority*. This word is perhaps not equally appropriate to all the varied cases it must cover. It might, e.g., better suggest believers who regard scriptures as being delivered by God to a human prophet, rather than those who think of sages uttering divine wisdom, or those whose faith centres on a joyful relationship with a personal lord and saviour. Yet clearly there is something common to these, which we might call authority. In each case, no matter how the revelation is conceived or how it is to function in the life of the believer, it comes not from human wit or invention but from God, or whatever is taken to be the ultimate source of being or wisdom. Hence it is not up for human revision.⁷

Seen in this way revelation, as the supreme case of legitimate authority, is binding on the believer. Yet this is not sufficient to establish any form of exclusivism. For a tradition might surely without incoherence claim to be revelation in the authoritative sense, while still maintaining that God has also revealed Himself in other ways, which were also authoritative for their believers. It would not be sufficient to reply that "since God cannot contradict Himself, we can know that whatever conflicts with (our revelation) is false" (*sup*). For that the claimed revelations in the end really conflict, is of precisely what non-exclusivists deny. A natural metaphor for them is to represent faiths as different paths up the same divine mountain. This allows the possibility that the description of the scenery, and even of the summit, might be very different from different startingpoints.

Another element is therefore also required for an exclusivist position. This is that *the revelation should claim to be the only or the supreme one*.⁸ If it does, then for the believer the circle seems closed. A revelation claims authority and requires obedience. Its claims include its own understanding of its relation to other faiths. If it sees itself as the supreme revelation, then to deny this is to deny its authority. Thus believers feel committed to maintaining that they do know it to be *the* truth, despite their ignorance of other faiths and their cultural conditioning.⁹

There is still much for such believers' reason to do: to reflect on their own experience so as to relate it more deeply to the faith; to articulate a deeper theological understanding of the revelation; and to defend the faith against criticism from outsiders. However though there are many questions *about* the revelation, there is no room for questioning *of* the revelation. Of course they may challenge it - either when first they meet it, or when, after accepting it, they later doubt. But the challenging is done *from the outside* - even if only provisionally from the outside, by those who do not yet know whether they are still believers or not.

The inevitable parallel is with a contest such as warfare. The simple believer may be like a private soldier willing to obey orders, but even the sophisticated intellectual is like a general fighting a campaign. To meet threats to his position he may put himself in his opponent's shoes, so as to envisage the likely attack. He might even acknowledge that it is an open question whether he will win or lose. But to regard it as an open question *whether he is fighting on the right side* is already basic disloyalty.

Such a position still leaves much room for manoeuvre with various forms of weak exclusivism, but it cannot avoid exclusivism as such. To the question at the end of Sec. 2, such a believer opposes another: How can I even raise the question whether my religion is *the* true one, without disobedience to the revelation by which I live? ¹⁰

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Given their commitment, then, what should be the attitude of exclusivist believers towards the role of human reason in defence of their faith? In principle there seem two "ideal types" of position here, though with many possible complexities and combinations. The first is the view that reason can show by adequate criteria the superiority of one's own religion. The second is that reason is incompetent, and that only God can bring a person to recognize the true faith. ¹¹

To discuss these I must first draw a working distinction between two notions, which I call rationality and reasonableness. ¹² Rationality (together with the adjectives "rational" and "irrational") may be given a narrow interpretation; it sets the rules for intelligible discourse. If people were really irrational - e.g. if they purported to admit the truth of propositions p and q and also to admit that p and q were inconsistent, without seeing the need to revise any of these three admissions - then intelligible discourse would be at an end. However rationality cannot take us far. Appeals to human reason must also involve a much wider notion of reasonableness. This (together with "reasonable" and "unreasonable") suggests an appeal to ordinary experience, and to the careful exercise of honest judgment. To claim that one's view is reasonable is to appeal to such judgment.

Let us now consider the first ideal type of attitude towards reason. It regards the apologetics (to borrow a Christian term) by which we show our religion to be correct, as essentially analogous to any established body of knowledge. Lack of agreement shows merely that at least one side must be in error. To use a persuasive analogy, just as every traditional culture had its own theories of physical nature, but surely only one - that of modern science - is correct, so it is to be with our religion.

Now perhaps often the real point of apologetic is to strengthen believers *within* the faith, by presenting to them the overall reasonableness of their position (cf. Sec.3). However, I am concerned with where it seriously aims at convincing the open-minded outsider. Here certain general criteria come into play. Even if an argument is perfectly valid in a logician's sense, this only shows that *if* its premisses are true we must accept its conclusion. Hence debate may always shift to the premisses with which we started. With inter-religious debates it would seem that only two courses are available. Either we must employ only premisses which are *in fact accepted* by

our opponents (as Christians and Muslims would both accept the existence of a God who would reveal Himself). Or else our premisses must be *naturalistic* ones ("naturalistic" as in "natural theology"); i.e. apparent to human reason as such, in the sense of being reasonable.

Now suppose, e.g., that our apologetic starts with some claim that God, being perfect goodness, might reasonably be expected to reveal Himself. This will seem reasonable to Jews, Christians and Muslims; though (as Aristotle would have insisted) it can be denied without irrationality. However a Christian would want to continue from this agreed starting point that we can see (even if only retrospectively) that it was appropriate for God to take on human flesh; something which to Muslims and Jews cuts totally across their sense of the unbridgeable gulf between Creator and creation. In passing beyond the initial agreement, we at the same time pass beyond what seems reasonable to these two faiths. And as yet we have picked up only a few threads in a tangle. E.g. a Buddhist would reject the very notion of a God reaching out to reveal Himself. At the other end, a Hindu might agree with Christians, against Jews and Muslims, on the reasonableness of incarnation. But why, he would ask, stop at one avatar? Others again would ask: is it not more reasonable that God would reveal himself to all peoples as best they could comprehend Him in their particular culture? And all this is still within agreement on a religious framework. We have not yet directed our apologetic against non-believers at all.

The mere fact that a debate is extraordinarily complex does not show it has no correct conclusion, but I have provided these reminders so as to suggest the following point. Our judgments about what it is fitting or appropriate to conceive of God or the Ultimate as doing or not doing, cannot be divorced from our understanding of His/Its nature. *But it is just this sort of understanding which is most clearly shaped by our own tradition and revelation.* Our efforts, therefore, to find reasonable starting premisses from which our rival conclusions would follow, will beg the question against those whose understanding has been shaped differently by their own tradition. Hence an *apparently inevitable inconclusiveness* seems to haunt our arguments. As soon as agreement ceases, different convictions about what is reasonable will also appear. ¹³

This apparently inevitable inconclusiveness, when recognized by believers, has often been used to justify the second ideal-type reaction, that reason is impotent and only God can lead us to faith; though Christian versions usually rely also on theological arguments, such as the corruption of reason by the Fall of Adam. As I am avoiding theology I shall say only enough to justify me, I hope, in putting such views on one side here.

These views may helpfully be seen as starting from a most important point. Acceptance of a faith is never a matter of *mere* reason; it involves an element where the response of one individual will differ from that of another, though each in general may seem equally intelligent. It is easy here to acknowledge the complexities of the human psyche, and in addition the believer may well see working the hand of God. The theoretical ideal type of this view, however, extends beyond this point so far as to claim that even the most honest, humble and reflective reasoning of which we are capable, will find the issue completely unsettled. At the logical, as opposed to emotional, level, this has a striking similarity to agnosticism. It says, "Faith cannot be justified

by reason, but I believe"; agnosticism retorts, "Faith cannot be justified by reason, so I don't". I confess that if forced to choose, I would have sympathy with the latter. However that same apparently inevitable inconclusiveness of argument, which can give this ideal type its initial impulse, presumably attaches to itself; it also cannot in turn conclusively establish the impotence of reason. Hence I shall continue to explore what attitude those who seek a reasonable faith should reasonably adopt towards the faith of others.

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So far my exclusivist examples come from Near Eastern religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The difficulties might seem not to arise for, e.g., Indian religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. For these normally assume there are many roads to God, Brahman or nirvana. Yet religions which proclaim their non-exclusivism do not easily escape the problems I have mentioned.

Surely religion is meant to be, *inter alia*, the ultimate intellectual framework into which all our thought should fit. The fit may be more or less loose. Western pluralism today emphasizes that an indefinite range of philosophies, scientific discoveries, artistic styles, etc. may be compatible with a given religion. But however broad a meta-framework it may be, it still involves a doctrine about the ultimate order and nature of the universe. Hence when tolerant faiths consider others, they do not just acknowledge them, but order them into a framework. Thus, e.g., it may be said that God is a way of conceiving the Ultimate which is appropriate for a certain stage of spiritual development, but is ultimately less satisfactory than an impersonal Brahman. So behind the perfectly genuine tolerance there are still important and contentious claims; above all, that the ultimate categories in terms of which these faiths describe the situation, are those in which the questions are to be posed and the answers given.

Hence however legitimate it may be for believers within a tradition to seek to understand another tradition in their own terms, and however charitable and universal they may try to make their standpoint, yet

for a specific religious tradition - any tradition - to make claims about universality is emphatically not for the tradition automatically to pass beyond its own frontiers It is still speaking to the world in terms of its own self-understanding, its own concepts, myths, images and symbols. The Christian universalist is still a Christian; the Hindu universalist is still a Hindu. The arguments and the assumptions of the one do not appeal to the other.¹⁴

What the exclusivist needed and lacked in Sec. 4 was a standpoint sufficiently *neutral* as between rival faiths. Tolerance is not equivalent to neutrality. A neutral standpoint would be *one which did not prejudge the framework in which the discussion was to proceed*; e.g. did not prejudge whether God or Brahman was the ultimately appropriate category. By this criterion it is not

clear that professedly non-exclusivist faiths are in any better position than exclusivist ones. In fact our problem precisely is: could there possibly be such a neutral framework? And if not, what is a believer to do?

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There are two striking features of the debate: the apparently inevitable inconclusiveness of the arguments, and the tendency for protagonists to overestimate the strength of their case. Why should this be so, and when if ever *can* we achieve reliable knowledge? This raises the whole vast set of philosophical issues concerning scepticism. I shall here direct attention to one central case, employing some insights from recent philosophy of science.

Traditionally, philosophers have often found it easiest to justify knowledge in cases such as mathematics and formal logic, where we merely draw out the implications of basic terms or notions. The other classic form of justification is to measure claims against experience. Here the clearest case is that of singular statements of fact. If I say there is a hippopotamus in the waste-paper basket, it may be impossible to assess the claim by logic alone, but it is easy to take a look. Yet these two cases (neither of which is immune from challenge by sceptical philosophers) do not cover very much. E.g. the laws of science, which are taken to apply at all times and places throughout the universe, seem to be neither independent of facts like mathematics, nor fully verifiable by observation like singular statements, and have therefore presented a problem. However the central case for our purposes arises as follows. If we are to make sense of individual facts, we must fit them into a wider intellectual framework. Our central problem is *the relation of such a framework to the phenomena it claims to illuminate*. I shall call such cases "framework problems."

The issues here have been much discussed in philosophy of science, though they also occur outside the scientific field.¹⁵ It is usually said to be the glory of science that its theories are corrigible by factual observation. Yet what precisely is the logical relation, in virtue of which the observed facts justify the explanatory theories? This question may seem relatively easy to answer in the case of generalizations which stick close to the facts (e.g. "all metals expand when heated"), and which can therefore be easily tested. But the major explanatory theories are typically expressed in terms of highly theoretical entities which are not even in principle directly observable (e.g. the particles of physics). The explanations are related to the observable facts only by long chains of reasoning which involve a whole set of other scientific laws. Only the complete body of laws as a whole can face the challenge of experience.

Suppose our results are not what we expect. A minor problem is that, since complex experiment is an art rather than a mechanical technique, the facts themselves are difficult to establish. The deeper problem, however, is that even if the data are accepted, they can show only *that* something is wrong,

and not *what* is. Not only is it always theoretically possible to preserve any one law by tinkering with the others, but in actual practice the right answer may be extremely difficult to find. Faced with such difficulties some philosophers of science have even concluded that our choices here are fundamentally non-rational. Even if we reject such pessimism, it seems clear that the criteria used for decision are flexible, complicated, not clear-cut or even well understood, and that they involve delicate, discriminating and highly fallible judgments. Moreover the process is heavily influenced by sociological factors. There are strict limits to what possibilities a scientific community will take seriously enough at a given time to spend time and energy on testing further.

Some decades ago it was common to contrast the corrigibility of scientific theories with the incorrigibility of metaphysical and religious ones. The above developments in philosophy of science make this view old-fashioned. If we put aside formal systems such as mathematics, we have a *continuum* of corrigibility by factual observation. The clearest cases are singular propositions (the hippopotamus in the waste-paper basket). Next to them are low-level generalizations ("all metals expand when heated"). Far removed from them is the holistic testing of high-level interconnected scientific theories. This, in turn, has features in common with the religious viewpoints we have been discussing; for these too present a picture of how the world is that is not easily refuted but does not seem neutral as between all possible facts. At the very extreme of incorrigibility we perhaps have some metaphysical positions equally consistent with all possible empirical facts.

However the breaking down of the old dichotomy does not solve our problem. The work on scientific framework problems has shown them to be less corrigible than had been supposed, but this does not make religious ones more corrigible. In fact if we compare the two the scientific framework questions are still much better off. Scientific laws are precise and quantitative. It is typically possible to predict what should happen in given circumstances, and the problem is only to find what *part* of the framework needs revision if we are wrong. Religious claims are much vaguer about what would refute them. What the comparison shows is only that the difficulties in science tend to explain and so to reinforce the problems we have already met in religion.

In short, framework problems are very difficult to solve. This was the point we met in Sec. 4; and I hope it answers the first problem at the beginning of this section, why the arguments seem so inconclusive. What of the second point, that people so easily overestimate the strength of them? I think this also follows from the framework nature of these issues. When many generations have articulated a framework which we inherit, it seems "obvious". It explains everything, because it is the way we have learnt to explain everything. When it is challenged we naturally seek reasonable premisses from which our viewpoint follows. But *what seems reasonable depends on the framework*. Hence the arguments proceed *from* the framework, and presuppose rather than establish it. The rival views produce different pictures, in crucial respects, about what is reasonable, so to each side the other seems simply unreasonable.

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I want now to offer my own views, both as to how best to proceed, and as to the most likely developments.

We might think of the present situation in terms again of two ideal types; this time the "scholar" and the "believer". Scholars stand outside the clash of faiths (though they will all have their own basic frameworks - e.g. perhaps liberal humanist ones), and they investigate such things as the history or the phenomenology of religions. Believers take their faiths to be the truth, and seek to make sense of the multiplicity of religions by fitting them into their own traditional framework. Over this gulf frail bridges may be thrown, in the form of individuals who do not conform entirely to either ideal type. Scholars may be believers. They may then find they have more difficulty in taking an impartial attitude towards other faiths, but have a compensatingly deeper insight into the value of their own. Or believers may develop a genuine interest in other faiths. *Qua* believers they cannot accept them, but they may make interesting comparisons with their own.

Yet though this picture represents, I think, the normal view, a new factor is also entering. There are believers within what have normally regarded themselves as exclusivist traditions, who claim to remain believers while rejecting the exclusivism.¹⁶ They have usually been moved by an awareness of cultural conditioning (Sec. 2) to think of their faith merely as *their* way rather than *the* way. This may not blatantly conflict with a generously weak exclusivism, which acknowledges many ways while claiming to be the supreme one. But the more clearly the issue is seen, the deeper the difference becomes.

Speaking as a believer to believers, I want to support this new non-exclusivism. However while endorsing the awareness of cultural conditioning, I want to add a further reason. This is the possibility of what I will call *internalization* of the conflicts we meet. This notion may perhaps best be approached through the more familiar one of dialogue between members of different faiths; though, as will appear, dialogue is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for internalization.

Consider, then, entering into a dialogue where there is an awareness of that danger we have continually seen, that we may beg the question by posing the issue in terms our partner does not accept. Suppose we abandon as hopeless the search for a completely neutral or independently reasonable starting point. We will recognize that we must each start from where we are, using the categories and perspectives we have. But we accept this as a startingpoint only. We *expect* that we will find our startingpoint - our deepest notions of what is reasonable - eventually open to challenge. We therefore see the discussion as likely to lead not only to an understanding of others' views but equally to greater *self*-understanding; to an uncovering of our own assumptions which were at first too deep for defence or even for overt expression.

This mutual uncovering can have various results. Sometimes it might show that our original position had no sound justification, and might thus produce a change of viewpoint. Sometimes it might lead to conflicting attitudes at the deepest level which we still cannot reconcile. But it can also lead to an increasing recognition of the value and importance of that in another

tradition which at first seemed to us unimportant, alien or even repugnant. Insofar as this happens, a new situation arises. The tension which was between us is felt increasingly within each of us. We *internalize* the values of the other. Hence we will increasingly seek a new insight which does justice to both sides of the tension, no longer caring whose original views may have changed in the process.

Such an approach is different from those I have discussed. It is not a search for a universal religion free from the idiosyncracies of particular faiths; for that, like the traditions it rejected, had unquestioned starting-points of its own. It is not a mere tolerance, which accepts the plurality of faiths while insisting on understanding the situation in its own categories. And it is not, of course, an exclusivist approach. Yet it is a process which all such positions, as well as atheist or agnostic ones, can in principle undertake.

We can now see why dialogue, though the natural place for such internalization to start, is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for it. It is not sufficient; for in much that is called dialogue people merely explore each other's views without wishing to change them. It is not necessary; for with today's access to information we may in principle learn and internalize other views without actually meeting their exponents. In fact a combination of both approaches may be best. Direct dialogue is an unrivalled way of exploring the subtleties of another position, but in private reflection we may find it easier to question our beliefs without defensiveness.

In any case we should realize that internalization may involve a very deep challenge to our whole framework of ideas. Hence as individuals we would all, I think, sooner or later find places where we could not contemplate change. But this discovery has its own value. It is one of the factors we may contribute to a generations-long process of continuing exploration, by which perspectives may gradually be broadened. We may contemplate, and even hope, that the principles we find inviolable might be seen by a later generation as unnecessary rigidities, the real value of which may be preserved in ways we cannot yet conceive.

Yet just because internalization involves a potential shaking of the foundations, many will reject it in principle. They may be regarded by those who embrace it as unnecessarily defensive. That will not move them; it is no news to them that the faith needs to be defended. Internalization can be commended only as a possible rather than a necessary path. On this point as elsewhere there are no conclusive arguments.

Internalization strongly reinforces an awareness of cultural conditioning in leading to non-exclusivism. Once we have experienced how a value from another tradition can complement the spiritual life of our own faith, any form of exclusivism is increasingly apt to seem parochial. Hence I and some others now see ourselves as non-exclusivist believers belonging to traditionally exclusivist faiths. By extension we take other faiths, however little we know of them, each to be a way but not the way. So we must consider the objections of that vast majority who are still exclusivists.

One deeply felt objection is often expressed in the form of deriding a "supermarket" attitude towards religions. This view insists that each great spiritual path is an organic whole, from which we cannot detach an isolated idea or practice. Hence even such non-exclusivists as Frithjof Schuon, who hold that each great faith is normally best for its adherents, may still oppose

any mixing of paths. To this we should reply that internalization should indeed be undertaken by a believer only seriously, humbly and perhaps through some sense of being called to grapple with the new pluralism of our times; but that when done in this way is unfair to compare it to the casualness of a supermarket choice. Whether it can lead, as we believe, to spiritual growth and insight, can surely only be decided by experience.

However the deepest objection, I suspect, comes again from the fundamental notion of the authority of revelation (Sec. 3). To question its exclusivist understanding of itself, it is felt, already puts us outside it; for to question it from the inside is disloyalty. Here we non-exclusivists are, I think, only beginning to develop the outlines of an alternative to the old conceptual framework. A few of the developing issues as I see them are as follows.

We would want to emphasize first what we take to be the real value behind exclusivism: its insistence that the revelation really is authoritative, God-given, and not up for human revision. Hence if we are to remain in our tradition, we must each find within it the elements which we believe justify us in our position; so that we will each be appealing to different authority.¹⁷ What we might have in common is the claim that if we must preserve the powerful but dangerous military metaphor (cf. Sec. 3), we should think of other faiths as allies rather than as the enemy; so that though our loyalty lies primarily to our own army we do not see it as that to which all should belong.¹⁸

However we are challenging the tradition's hitherto accepted understanding of itself. Hence I think we must in the end be prepared to elaborate and defend two vast claims: firstly, that it would not be the texts of any scripture that would be the trouble, but rather the interpretative framework; and secondly that such frameworks can and do alter.

Firstly: the authoritative writings or traditions of any faith must always be given an overall interpretation. Now doubtless there will be texts which appear to support an exclusivist interpretation; but I suspect none are such that they absolutely require it. In support I offer one brief consideration. When people set out to draft a legal document not subject to ambiguity, it is almost beyond the wit of man to produce one about which there can be no dispute. That is why we have lawyers. Considering, e.g., the range and variety of scriptures, and the fact that, fortunately, they do not appear to have been drafted by needle-eyed lawyers, it is likely that no alternative interpretations can be found?¹⁹

Granted that all interpretation involves a framework, the second claim is that frameworks can and do alter. Here we might appeal again to the parallels with science. Historians of science have noted that there is a relatively narrow band of permissible interpretation which a scientific community will take seriously at any one time, but that this band may gradually change. The view which in one generation is simply absurd and beyond the pale of competent opinion, may become in the process of time first radical, then a serious possibility, then a full-blown challenge to the accepted view, and finally orthodox. So also in religious matters there may be at a given point a relatively narrow band of orthodoxy, but it may also shift in time. We are setting out to hasten the shift.

What then is my guess as to the actual outcome? The present debate will doubtless continue. Whether non-exclusivism spreads among believers will depend largely on social and psychological factors entirely outside the

matters discussed: how pluralist societies become; how tolerant they can be of change in valued social structures; how threatened people may feel by basic changes; even what policies governments in various countries may adopt. Certainly, whether or not more believers come to hold their faith non-exclusively, I do not myself think we are moving in our own society towards any overall religious unity. Indeed if the evidence of the past is any guide, any new group claiming to be a way which can unite all others, would become only one more group to swell the plurality.

There is a final point. I have kept it till now because it seems most likely to be a *result* of non-exclusivist reflection; but it could occur at the outset, and hence could rank as a third stimulus to this approach along with awareness of cultural conditioning and internalization. It is that some of us non-exclusivists may think we glimpse a possible area of knowledge underlying all faiths. For me at least, "glimpse" is the right word. Such developments might correlate closely enough with our scientific knowledge to lead us eventually to think of a science of the spirit or of higher states of consciousness.²⁰ Or they might turn out, in whole or in part, to look more like a detailed phenomenology of higher spiritual states. Eventually we might expect such investigations to generate their own framework of understanding, based on a comparative examination and classification of material from many faiths.²¹ We need not expect such a discipline to establish its framework once and for all; no science does. Yet it might give us a new sense of our spiritual dimensions and possibilities; a sense we could not have achieved within any one tradition, before our new pluralism forced us to take seriously the multiplicity of faiths.

Such a discipline might increasingly explain why particular faiths lead, insofar as they do, to spiritual development, and also why their perversions are perverse. Yet unless non-religious assumptions are first imported, to explain is not to explain away. Rather we might hope it would emerge as part of the general theory itself, that at least most of us need a *particular* faith if we are to grow spiritually: some specific spiritual practice, some traditionally venerated ritual, some group in which we feel at home, and hence some social institutions to provide them. The justification of different faiths would be not diminished but more clearly established, even though their practices might themselves be modified in the light of the general theory. This might also be shown to hold, not only for the practical need of a spiritual path but for the specific doctrines in individual faiths. For, again subject to possible modification in the light of the general theory, it might increasingly be seen that each theology, based as it is on its own startingpoint and moulded by its own experience, would from its own unique perspective coherently mirror that general theory. Thus both in their practice and in their doctrine, the decay of exclusivism might mean the flourishing of faiths.

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NOTES

1. The first ancestor of this paper was read at the 5th A.A.S.R. Conference in Canberra in May 1980. There was a reply by Dr. L. A. Fitzgerald O.P., and discussion with innumerable other people. An intermediate form of it was read later to my philosophy department staff seminar at the University of New England. Both these occasions have vastly speeded its evolution into its present form, and I am very grateful for them. No one involved (least of all Dr. Fitzgerald) will need to be assured they are not responsible for the final result.
2. On the possible views, cf. E. J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (Duckworth, 1975). For the issue I discuss, cf. J. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Collins, 1977), especially Chs. 9 and 10.
3. For a penetrating discussion of universalism, cf. E. J. Sharpe's Charles Strong Lecture, "Universal Religion for Universal Man" (*Colloquium*, 1978).
4. The Christians might well have begun as strong exclusivists. The Muslims would not; for the Qur'an acknowledges many God-given revelations, and claims merely to be the only infallible one. However on the question of attitude mentioned in Sec. 1, Islam has perhaps on the whole been even more self-confident than Christianity.
5. As an example of how far things have changed in one case, cf. the irenical approach of Vatican II. See Hick *op. cit.*, Ch. 9.
6. I owe this paragraph above all to Dr. Fitzgerald.
7. I present this as a point about the meaning given to "revelation". Atheists and agnostics could agree; though they would add that there is not, or is not known to be, anything which actually is a revelation in this sense. There are certainly also believers who do not build this meaning into the term. However unless they have other arguments they logically should not, and normally will not, be exclusivists.
8. To say that a revelation claims something covers many cases. E.g. it might be held that the written scriptures were unambiguous; or that they included meta-principles indicating how to arrive at a proper interpretation; or that the tradition appoints some person or institution as an authoritative interpreter of them.
9. This point must be distinguished from a closely similar one. A revelation (whether claiming to be supreme or not) may well contain advance warnings of challenges to the faith, such as bereavement, hardship or persecution. To persist in faith despite these challenges is a virtue. Hence it may seem that faith by its very nature involves a refusal to question the revelation. Yet this is a confusion, however natural. It is in principle possible, though perhaps psychologically difficult, to hold that while one's faith should not be questioned when the evils of the world test it, it should be open to revision if new considerations of genuine intellectual cogency should arise. It is not the virtue of faith but the nature of the revelation's claim, which leads to exclusivism.
10. Still, it might be said, surely we can ask them to engage at least in a "methodic", as opposed to actual, doubt - like Descartes, who undertook to doubt whatever logically could be doubted in order to find what, if anything, was absolutely certain. This possibility is rarely raised, but

- perhaps an exclusivist might offer various sorts of reply. (a) "Yes, I can engage in methodic doubt, but this cannot touch my faith. For if I can find no adequate reasons I will believe by faith alone." (b) "It would be disloyal even to engage in methodic doubt, so I will not." (c) "I find it psychologically impossible to doubt even hypothetically." I think these possibilities are covered explicitly or implicitly by my later discussion.
11. Though I am avoiding all theology, I take it that within Christianity of one example of the first is the traditional Catholic position, while the second suggests at least one common interpretation of such Protestant theologians as Karl Barth.
 12. There would be great complications in precisely distinguishing these notions, but I hope they are clear enough for my purposes.
 13. In fact the problem arises not only in a search for reasonable starting-points but even in what seem like much more specific issues. To take just one example, inter-religious apologetic not only in the past but often today appeals to miracles as showing the truth faith. But consider the following. (1) The argument begs the question *ab initio* against many reasonable people. E.g. those who reject paranormal phenomena in psychology would typically reject *a fortiori* all reports of miracles based merely on testimony. (2) Amongst believers, we would need to agree on neutral criteria for assessment: e.g. perhaps some analogous to those used by the Catholic Church in investigating claims to sanctification, though without any restrictions as to the faith involved. But as a sheer matter of fact any impartial application of such criteria would find evidence of miracles (e.g. healing or levitation) in many if not all faiths. Thus again we would need to examine all other traditions as honestly as our own; but this is never done by such apologetic. (3) Even if some conclusion could be reached on the evidence, would any believers, whose faith guides their lives, be willing to give it up merely because of evidence that some other faith produced more or better miracles? Surely there would be plenty of possible explanations consistent with their faith.
 14. E. J. Sharpe, "Universal Religion for Universal Man" (*Colloquium*, 1978), p.28.
 15. The *loci classici* for the following points are Karl Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (Hutchinson, 1959), and Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd edn., Uni. Chicago Press, 1970). A further valuable discussion is in I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave (eds.), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (C.U.P., 1970).
 16. An outstanding example is Hick, *op.cit.*
 17. E.g. Christians might quote Jesus's word in St. John: "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." (John 16:12). Other believers would have to put it each in terms of their own revelation. Actually there is again a basic parallel here with science. In the cases (which Kuhn has called "scientific revolutions") where the deep assumptions of the ongoing tradition are brought up for reconsideration, the challenge to existing science is done by scientists *in the name of science*.

18. Who, then, is the common enemy? *Not*, please, "Godless communism" or other non-religious movements, which should rather be asked to bring their own insights to the dialogue if they will; but ignorance and evil wherever found, including in our own faith.
19. Specifically with the Christian tradition, there is a further point. The texts commonly cited for exclusivism ("No one comes to the Father but by me" (Jn. 14:16), "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 3:12), etc.) seem *prima facie* to suggest *strong* exclusivism. To treat them, as most Christians already do, as implying only weak exclusivism, requires re-interpretation in the light of a wider context of beliefs. (As an example only, it might be said that the "me" and the "name" refer to the Logos, the second person of the Trinity, Who may be present also in other faiths by which men come to God.) Any such re-interpretation makes it easier to find a completely non-exclusivist one.
20. I have in mind work on the changes in physiology, EEG brain wave patters, etc., found in people in higher states of consciousness. As an example of the large amount of work already done, cf. D. W. Orme-Johnson and J. T. Farrow (eds.), *Scientific Research on the Transcendental Meditation Program*, Collected papers, Vol. 1 (MERU Pr. 1977).
21. The analogy with other sciences would suggest that classification is likely to come first, followed much later by a penetration to underlying explanatory principles which may not be exemplified anywhere in their "pure" form.