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Religious Plurality and Realist Christianity: Idolatry and the Testing of One's Faith

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The descriptive realist Christian, as portrayed here, is one who holds both that there is only one true description of salvific reality, and no other description, save the Christian one, is true and that those who do not come to faith in Christ are not among the redeemed. I argue that there is an existential problem of religious plurality that descriptive realist Christians face. I analyze it in terms of sin and idolatry, explicating it in terms of the problem of evil, and suggest how the descriptive realist Christian is called to respond to the problem within the framework of descriptive realist Christian commitment.

That there are many religious faiths, each claiming to be true, no one can fail to see.[1] That there are actually conflicting truth claims is perhaps less obvious, but not entirely opaque. But for the Christian, the founder of whose faith explicitly says that he is the way, the truth, and the life and that no one comes unto the Father but by him, the exclusivistic claims of the faith are lit up in neon. Among the apparent implications of these claims of Christ is that at least some of the salvific beliefs of all other religious and, for that matter, nonreligious worldviews are false. Further, although perhaps God has some way of saving people of other faiths through the work of Christ, even if they are unaware of such grace, the task of the Christian includes preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to the unbelieving masses as the fullest account of salvific truth. A Christian fails in this task only at the peril of others's eternal salvation. As well, and most important for this essay, it is needful that the Christian be faithful to the gospel to the end. Since the gospel is, in the fullest sense, the truth, the Christian wanders away from that truth with its exclusivistic claims only at the peril of his or her own salvation.

The salvific claims of Christianity are often taken to be exclusivistic in a dual sense. First, they are exclusivistic in a metaphysically realist sense, that is, there is only one true description of salvific reality and no other description, save the Christian one, is true. Second, they are exclusivistic in that those who do not come to faith in Christ are not among the redeemed. At least this is one reading of the Christian tradition. This kind of exclusivism is not the only possibility, of course. There are inclusivist readings of Chris-

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tianity. These too may be realist positions, at least so far as they claim that there is only one true description of reality. Inclusivists may face problems like those described herein, although I will not concentrate on inclusivism here. There are also pluralist Christian positions. These, so far forth, are less likely to be realist in a descriptive sense. However, not all realisms are descriptive in nature. There are realisms of reference in which it is claimed that certain terms in religious language refer to an actual, transcendent Being or reality, even if the descriptions are not accurate. A Christian pluralist might be a realist so far as reference is concerned. But since I will concentrate on the position of the Christian who holds both the exclusivist claims with which this paragraph began, the realism involved is not simply one of reference but also of description. I shall call Christians who hold both exclusivist beliefs "descriptive realist Christians" (or, for short, "realist Christians").[2] The realist Christian thus holds that there is only one true description of salvific reality, that the description is contained, more or less accurately, in the Scriptures and/or traditions of the Church, and that those who do not come to faith in Christ are not among the redeemed. I suggest that for the realist Christians, there is a problem with religious plurality, that is, with the existence of other religions and their truth claims. But what, exactly, is the problem?

There is a parallel between the problem of religious plurality and the problem of evil that can help us get clear about the issue. Some philosophers distinguish between philosophical and existential problems of evil. Philosophical problems of evil are, it is supposed, amenable to rational analysis—hence a good clear discussion of the logical problem of evil can (perhaps) show the atheologian that a rational defense of theism's central claims is possible. But such a defense is little comfort to the parent who is angry at God when his or her young child is stricken with some horrible disease, or when someone is overwhelmed by the sheer horridness of evil. It is often suggested that problems of this latter, existential variety require pastoral rather than philosophical counselling. Parallel to this, one can think of the problem of religious plurality as having two aspects, or perhaps as being two problems, one philosophical and one existential. The former has to do with epistemic issues, the central question of which is this: Doesn't the existence of other, competing sets of, presumably justified (religious) beliefs challenge the epistemic status of one's own religious beliefs, and thus, isn't one's own Christian belief, so far forth, irrational or at least in some way less strongly justified than one's commitment to those beliefs?

William Alston and Alvin Plantinga reply to this question when they argue that the existence of religions whose truth claims conflict and therefore compete with the claims of Christianity does not remove *all* epistemic justification or warrant from one's Christian beliefs. The existence of these religions may, however, act as undercutting defeaters of one's Christian commitment,

as Plantinga puts it, or lower the strength of rationality of one's engaging in the Christian epistemic practice, as Alston puts it.[3] On the strength of this point, and to some degree, one can understand how a Christian who is aware of competing religious truth claims may have less confidence than otherwise that she is right about her Christian beliefs. Or perhaps, as Plantinga suggests, the believer may not *know*, after discovering the myriad of other religions, some of the central claims of the faith-once-delivered, even though the beliefs remain rational for her. Still, such a person's beliefs may be justified or warranted. The philosophical problem is thus thought to be solved, at least for the most part, by thinkers such as Alston and Plantinga.

But neither of the epistemic results put forth by Plantinga and Alston helps us to understand why some people find the fact of religious plurality so damaging to their faith. And here the realist Christian faces the existential problem of religious plurality. While not every Christian will agree that moving away from the exclusivistic claims of Christ to a more inclusive or pluralistic understanding of religious faith is a bad thing, from the point of view of more "conservative"—and in some cases, more "traditional"—under-standings of Christian belief, such a move is not consonant with the teachings of Scripture nor the tradition of the Church. Perhaps more importantly, at least so I would be inclined to suggest, some people who face the problem of religious plurality find themselves with no religious, let alone Christian, beliefs at all. The eroding away of Christian beliefs in the face of religious plurality does happen, even though the Alston-Plantinga platform suggests that there is not sufficient reason in the fact of the plurality alone to justify the erosion. Similarly, even if the philosophical problem of evil is "solved" by the free will defense, some Ireanean account of evil, or what have you, the existential problem of evil may erode away or destroy the theistic beliefs of someone who is moved, psychologically, emotionally, or spiritually, by the evil in the world.

So the existential problem of religious plurality is simply that, because of the claims of other religions, some Christians find themselves believing the claims of the Christian faith less strongly, and hence explaining away the apparently exclusivistic nature of those claims, or, in other cases, not believ-ing Christian claims at all. This is a particularly vexing problem for realist Christians, for what one risks losing, upon losing one's belief that Christ is the only true way, is one's eternal salvation. I wish to suggest that, in a certain way, the problem of religious plurality is a subproblem of the problem of evil. The existence of competing religious truth claims is an evil, in that their existence can lead one away from the true faith.

My goal is to explore how the descriptive realist Christian is to understand the inclination to untie the tie that binds, loosening his or her attachment to the claims of Christianity, as the existence of other religious worldviews

comes to be known. My purpose, more explicitly, is to explore the existential problem of religious plurality along with some connections to the philosophical problem. My discussion will draw, to some degree, on recent discussions of the problem of evil and will attempt to sketch out some of the connections between the existence of religious plurality and evil from within the Christian tradition.

One final introductory remark. Since I want to concentrate, for the most part, on the existential problem of religious plurality rather than the philosophical one, shouldn't we be turning to pastoral advice rather than philosophical thought to give aid? Again, we can turn to discussions of the problem of evil for precedent. Not everyone believes that the philosophical and existential problems of evil should be dealt with separately. Marilyn McCord Adams argues that viewing the problem of evil as a puzzle (rather than an atheological argument) can lead to understanding connections between the philosophical and existential problems of evil. This requires, she suggests, drawing heavily on the Christian theological traditions, and this leads to what some would call a blurring of the line between theology and philosophy. Adams does not believe that the lines are being blurred and engages in what is, in the best sense, Christian philosophy.[4] As to the problem of religious plurality, neither do I believe that the philosophical and existential problems should be dealt with separately. With Adams's suggestions as motivation, I propose that viewing the problem of religious plurality as a puzzle, rather than an atheological argument, can lead to understanding connections between the philosophical and existential problems of religious plurality. Like Adams's discussion of the problem of evil, my discussion of religious plurality will appeal to the Christian tradition itself, since part of my goal is to help realist Christians understand how they are called to respond in the face of religious plurality.

In section 1 I give some brief suggestions as to why we have the religious plurality that we do. Section 2 ties these suggestions into the notion of sin. In section 3 I appeal to some work of Marilyn McCord Adams to explain why sin is not simply a moral notion. I also explain sin's relevance to the problem of religious plurality. Section 4 returns to another biblical theme, idolatry, and connects it to religious plurality. A parable, and a brief explanation of the parable vis-à-vis how a realist Christian ought to respond to the problem of religious plurality, follow in section 5.

1. *Epistemic Limitations and the Source of Religious Plurality*

Elsewhere I have explored one source of what I call "theistic pluralism," where I narrowed the issue of religious plurality to deal only with religions in which one finds alternative descriptions of God.[5] My argument there suggests that there are limits to what theistic experience can give us. It can't, for

example, give us the central but distinctive doctrinal claims. I mean by "doc-trinal claims" simply those descriptions of the supernatural that differentiate one supernatural being from another. For example, whereas both Allah and Yahweh are believed to have all the "omni" properties, only one is the Father of Jesus and co-essential with Jesus and the Holy Spirit while the other has revealed himself to and through Mohammed. It is, of course, on these claims that much of the salvific content of the various theistic traditions rest. I argue, then, that so far as the doctrinal claims go, experience alone cannot point us in one direction or another. So one source of religious plurality, among the-istic religions at any rate, is a limit of our epistemic abilities.

The argument of that paper assumes that our fundamental epistemic access to God is experiential. And, naturally, there may be nonexperiential ways of deciding between the truth claims of various religions. I do not wish to deny that. However, I am sceptical about these other approaches. In fact, I wish to suggest that the limit on our experience-based religious epistemic practices is only one of a much larger set of limitations on our general epistemic practices. For example, another, and perhaps central, limitation is that there is no procedure or method external to our basic epistemic practices in virtue of which we can check a given practice's reliability and hence provide what we might call epistemic certainty—some sort of truth-guarantee of our be-liefs. But in a case where one's eternal destination is at stake, at least some of us would like a whole lot more certainty than we can have. But because we do not have what William Alston calls "full reflective justification"—where we not only can show p to be justified but can also show all the beliefs used in the justification of p to be justified—it seems unlikely that we can ever have the kind of certainty we would like. Perhaps we couldn't have certainty even if we had full reflective justification, since justification is not the same thing as, nor sufficient for, certainty. To recognize these limits is to recognize the humble state of our epistemic situation.[6] And so I propose that we have the religious plurality we do because our epistemic abilities operate under these, and other, more or less severe shortcomings. In fact it is a deep-seated part of the Christian worldview that the various religious tradi-tions have arisen because of human epistemic finitude.

2. An Epistemically Limited Garden

The assumption that the source of religious plurality is a limitation (or set thereof) on our epistemic practices is not a surprising one, given the Christian tradition. In the story of the Garden, Adam and Eve are told that they are free to eat of the fruit of any tree save one; the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is important that it is the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil, for on at least one common understanding of the events leading up to the Fall, God is testing the obedience or faithfulness of his created images. Since Adam

and Eve do not know good and evil, the command from God is a "raw" command, rather like when a parent simply commands a very young child not to cross the street without holding the parent's hand. The child simply does not understand the danger nor is she capable of understanding it. The command from the parent is, therefore, a raw command. It is not understood by the child except that the child trusts the parent and his or her knowledge. Nevertheless, the child ought (do not read "morally ought") to obey.

So, it is not surprising, from a Christian point of view, that there are limits on what we humans know. This is a result of, among other things, the fact that there are things we cannot know. And this follows from the even more basic fact that humans are finite. Thus, it should not be surprising that there are limits to what we can know or rationally believe. In fact, it is arguable that the issue of epistemic limitations is what is really at stake in the story of the Garden. The test God puts before Adam and Eve is not simply an arbitrary one. It has its point beside the show of brute power. The point is that God is allowing Adam and Eve to live as they were designed to live, *viz.*, within the boundaries God has made.

One of these boundaries is the recognition that Adam and Eve do not know certain things. In particular, they do not know good and evil. So they know something: that there is something they do not know. But because of what they do not know, *viz.*, good and evil, they cannot know the ultimate results of taking the fruit. But unlike (perhaps) the child who does not yet recognize the limits of her epistemic apparatus, it is arguable that Adam and Eve do recognize their limitations, at least in an important way. The sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden is a sin of pride. It is the unfounded belief that they are better than they actually are, ontologically; the belief that what God knows, *viz.*, good and evil, is something they are ontologically capable of knowing and bearing the results of. In taking the fruit, it is both their ontological and epistemological limitations that they are attempting to overcome. "Ye shall be as gods," says the serpent. As they find out, their finite being is not capable of bearing the *knowledge* of good and evil without getting entangled *in* good and evil. One presumes, on God's part, that his infinite nature does not lead to this entanglement. So it is in ignorance that Adam and Eve attempt to move into God's territory, since they do not, apparently, know what will result from putting themselves forward as God's equals.

I link these epistemic limitations to religious plurality because it is here that part of the Christian story can help explain why the existence of competing religious truth claims is sometimes difficult for the believer. Humans have limits, and at the core of the Christian story is our failure to live within our limits, and in particular, our ontological *cum* epistemological limits. Just as the test God lays before Adam and Eve is one in which he says, "trust me; be faithful," so God says to the contemporary realist Christian who faces the

plethora of religious truth claims, "trust me; be faithful." The existence of other competing truth claims is, in short, a test of the Christian's faith. The Christian who comes face to face with the competing claims is, in fact, coming face to face with the limits of human epistemic practices, and those who are not pleased to dwell within such limits sometimes fall into sin.

3. *Sin and Plurality*

I want to emphasize that such sins do not involve immorality. Sin is primarily a religious concept and not a moral one. I am inclined to agree with Adams in her supposition that the root of sin is pre-moral and hence ontological. She proposes, in a paper where she tries to "lend vivacity and plausibility to" the idea, that sin is some sort of impropriety between God and creatures and that "the fundamental obstacle to Divine-human relations lies in the very incommensuration of Divine and created natures."[7] I think Adams does lend vivacity and plausibility to the idea, and thus I take it that the things that normally count as sins or sinful—choices, actions, habits, and character traits—are results of the Divine-human incommensuration. Adams suggests that we humans are, in virtue of our lowly ontological state, unclean and hence separated from God. God's attempts with ancient Israel to keep them separate from the world around them were in fact attempts to point out to Israel ontological unclarities—examples of uncleanness—of which they were to have no part. To be separate is to be holy, and just as God was separate from humanity—the unclean, the sinners—so humans were to be separate from certain animals (among other things)—the unclean.[8]

If Adams is right, then sin, at its root, is not voluntaristic or moral. It is ontological. And our ontological status has epistemic import. What we *are* limits what we can *know*. It is not, of course, that we know nothing. Some things we know, others we don't or can't. In fact, it is the odd mixture of knowledge and the lack thereof that can entangle us in sin. In the Garden we knew our boundary—it was over on that hill, where the fruit of that tree was hanging down low—but we didn't know what crossing the boundary would mean, and in our finitude we ate the fruit. It was a kind of epistemic misjudgment, but one based on something we thought was valuable. Having more knowledge, and being like the one who made us, seem like valuable things. Indeed, they are—but only for those who are mature enough to deal with them. Just as we do not explain the details of sex to young children, because they cannot, by their stature in life, understand them, so God withheld certain things from Adam and Eve. We sometimes put little children, or allow them, into situations where they can live well, but within their bounds. So God put Adam and Eve in such a setting. And we knew what we weren't supposed to do—eat the fruit of that one tree. There was, however, no moral "ought" behind the command. We were incapable of understanding a moral ought,

having no knowledge of good and evil. Yet we, because of our immaturity and finitude, believed we could be like God, knowing good and evil. We also believed we were ready for it. The serpent told us so. It was, in part, ignorance that led to the early harvesting, and so the test of our faithfulness in the Garden was a test of our ability to live within the bounds of our own nature. God told us he loved us. He told us our limits. And we used those limits to be unfaithful, unleashing moral havoc into the world.

Here it is helpful to call attention to a principle that Adams introduces. It seems clear, she says, that

> an individual human being's capacity to produce (or be a salient member in a causal chain leading to) suffering (horrendous or otherwise) exceeds his/her ability to experience it.

She continues:

> This is obvious quantity-wise: Adam suffered one individual's worth of ignorance and difficulty, but his sin brought it to many; Hitler organized a holocaust of millions; small numbers of government leaders, scientists, and military personnel brought about the atomic explosions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is probably true quality-wise, both trivially, in that each person's suffering is unique, and significantly (e.g., can a childless male soldier experience anything like enough to the suffering of a mother whose child is murdered before her eyes?).[9]

The relevance of this principle, and several other observations Adams makes, for the problem of evil is that created agents could not bear primary moral responsibility or blame for the origin of evil. Nevertheless, their actions in the Garden unleashed powerful evil into the world. The connection to the problem of plurality is that at the core of the act leading to moral evils, including the evils that may result from religious plurality (lack of redemption), is a lack of knowledge, or a limit on knowledge, that was true of Adam and Eve simply in virtue of their finitude. Adam and Eve could not, not knowing good and evil (that is, having no experience of it), be morally responsible for the evils that befell them or the rest of the world.

Because of this way of understanding the Garden story, it is easy to take the test in the Garden as one slice of the problem of evil. Why should God, being all good, test us in our ontological and epistemic weakness, especially when the test's failure would lead to such evil? Why should sin be traceable to finitude? Doesn't that get us off, but hang God on, the hook? Perhaps it gets us off the *moral* hook, and so, as Adams suggests, there may be theodicy without blame,[10] but sin is not simply immorality.[11] It is a failure to live within the bounds of our own existence, a failure to live as we were created.

To illustrate, consider the following. My two and a half year old knows he is not to jump or stand on the couch. If you ask him, he will (often, at least) tell you the rule. Occasionally he jumps anyway, especially when I am on the

couch beside him, and he can catch my eye with his best mischievous look. Once he has been warned, he will, sometimes, still jump. He is, then, the recipient of discipline. On occasion, after this ritual, he says, "Ian's bad." But is he? And in what sense? Is he morally bad? I don't think so, but he has failed to live within his ontological and physical capabilities. It is not that he isn't perfect. Precisely the opposite. It is that he is imperfect but refuses to admit it. He has failed to recognize that his parents, in this case, know best. So he has done something worthy of discipline and correction. It is needful for him to learn to act in a manner that is within his capability—to act, in this case, safely. The only way for him to do so (at this age, at least) is for him to learn obedience and trust, but also to learn that trust through committing the "wrong" act. He sometimes jumps on the couch when his parents are not within reach, and he sometimes hurts himself. He knows he is not to jump but it is not clear that he knows the potential consequences of jumping. A few jumps ending in (one hopes) only minor hurts will enable him to trust his parents as more knowledgeable than he. So in some sense, his knowing his parents is a good—a sort of metaphysical good, since we are his guides for safe and hence good behavior. We *do* know what jumping on the couch can lead to, but simply explaining it to him would not be enough.

Like this, except in unfathomably greater ways, knowing God is a good unsurpassable. This good, as Adams suggests, following the medieval philosophers, is a metaphysical good. God is the Supremely Valuable Object, and knowing him is enough to "engulf" the horrendous evils that happen to individuals. Furthermore, God may insist on "making horrors meaningful through defeat,"[12] which may be accomplished by our identifying with Christ through suffering or by giving us some insight into the inner life of God.

The connection of all the foregoing to the problem of religious plurality is just this. The problem of evil construed through an ontological understanding of sin has an ontological solution, *viz.*, God himself. Likewise, the fact of religious plurality (knowledge) resulting from our epistemic limitations (lack of knowledge) tempts us away from trusting God, just as our knowledge/lack of knowledge tempted us away from trusting God in the Garden. Expecting God to provide us with sure epistemic access to himself in our immature state is rather like expecting God to have given Adam and Eve epistemic access to good and evil when they were unprepared to have it. And again parallel to the problem of evil, the solution to the problem of plurality is ontological, but with an epistemic and practical twist, *viz.*, recognizing and living with our finitude now, with the expectation of future awareness of God's greater Being later, an awareness in which we shall be overwhelmed by God's Being, and never turn away from him again. There will be, at the point of the Beatific Vision of God, no epistemic shortfallings.

4. *Idolatry and the Garden*

So, falling into disbelief because of religious plurality can be construed as a sin. But what sin? I suggest it is the sin of idolatry. When Yahweh led the children of Israel out of Egypt he commanded them: You shall have no other gods before me. But if Christianity is true, there are no other gods. This is contrary, on one reading, to what the first commandment suggests, for if the Israelites were to have no other god before Yahweh, there must have been other gods. So if Christianity is true in its claim that there is only one God, Israel's constant temptation to worship some other god was founded on a falsehood—that there are other gods—rather than on the existence of a pantheon of gods, of whom Yahweh was the greatest.

The Hebrew Scripture's picture of Israel's temptation to idolatry is often that of unfaithfulness rather than that of simply believing a falsehood. The other gods seemed real, I suspect, to the ancient Israelites—they believed in them and, in some cases, worshiped them. To use William James's language, the worship of the other gods was a live option for the Israelites. Thus the problem of religious plurality was, for them, not merely an abstract problem as to whether the existence of competing religious beliefs affected the epistemic status of their belief in Yahweh. It was very much like the temptation of a person to cheat on his or her spouse, which is far more existential than abstract. Nevertheless, I suspect the temptation to adultery with the other members of the pantheon was rooted in epistemic concerns. Could they really trust Yahweh to take them to the promised land? It is, after all, so much easier to worship what you can see—a golden calf, for instance.

But, of course, the 20th century Western Christian's temptation is not, often at least, to leave the worship of God for some other, but to worship no God at all.[13] The ancient Israelite's epistemic problem was to sort out which God was the most powerful. Ours is to sort out whether there is any God at all. So, in some ways, both the philosophical and existential problems of plurality are peculiarly modern, and they do not really result in a temptation to idolatry understood as putting some other god before the God and Father of Jesus Christ. But that makes our challenge more akin to the one faced by Adam and Eve. Our challenge is to avoid moving away from a trusting relationship with God to trusting ourselves and our self-constructed visions of reality in which we humans are the center piece. But if idolatry is not simply the temptation to follow some other god, but includes putting ourselves in pride of place, then the temptation to cease believing in God in the face of religious plurality is indeed a temptation to idolatry, perhaps of the worst kind.

In Romans 1: 21-25, Paul wrote the following (NIV):

> For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and ex-

changed the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever to be praised. Amen.

This passage is important in a number of ways. First, Paul here links epistemic concerns, pride, idolatry, and "ontologically gapped" beings into his theological account of human responsibility to God for sin. Although humans knew God as God (read "Creator, eternally powerful, with a divine nature"— see verse 20), they did not glorify him or thank him but their *thinking* became futile! They exchanged the glory of God for created glory, in themselves and in other non-human animals. And then comes what appears to be a very curious connection to sexual impurity. Beside all the Hebrew Scripture's legal strictures involved with sex and reproduction (e.g., bodily fluids, including semen (Lev. 22:4) and menstrual blood (Lev. 12:1, Lev. 15) rendered one unclean—again a symbol of the ontological gap between humans and God), faithful marriage and the marriage bed are central symbols of God's faithfulness to his people. Apparently Paul thought that because of our turning away from God to other idols, God gave us over to unfaithfulness in our sexual relationships as well, rounding out the symbol.

The second way in which this passage is important is that one of the paths by which humans become idolaters is to make images of themselves. This returns us to the above paragraph, save one. In the Garden, Adam and Eve raised themselves up to the level of God, inappropriately taking cuts in the ontological line up. They were not guilty of idolatry in the literal sense of putting some other god before Yahweh. But they were guilty of worshipping the created order, *viz.*, themselves, rather than God. It is precisely this that Paul identifies as idolatry. It is thus arguable that when modern Christians fall prey to the problem of religious plurality, existential or otherwise, they fall prey to idolatry. They put themselves forward as epistemic arbiters of salvific theological truth, something that, within the Christian tradition, is sinful. It is a kind of spiritual adultery, where, in this case, we cheat on God with ourselves as the extramarital lover.

Again, I do not see that this involves immorality. Nor is it clear to me that adultery is immoral.[14] It is wrong, yes. But not immoral. Adultery is religiously or, more specifically, Christianly wrong, for it breaks the symbol for our relationship to God, *viz.*, faithfulness. We are to be faithful to God and therefore a person is to be faithful to his or her spouse. Being unfaithful maritally is symbolic of being unfaithful religiously. In ancient Israel's time, the turn was away from Yahweh, the spouse, to some other god. In our time, and perhaps, oddly enough, in the story of the Garden, the turning is away

from Yahweh to ourselves—a kind of masturbation that detracts from one's faithfulness to one's spouse. It is putting our own ontological status on the same level as God's.[15]

So the temptation to give up one's faith because of religious plurality is the temptation to idolatry understood through the symbolism of adultery.

5. *A Parable*

What, then, is the proper response of a realist Christian to the fact of religious plurality? A parable may help us think through the issue.

During a great war, the enemy invades all the countries of the world. The enemy is very evil. Resistance movements develop in all the countries. In a certain country one evening, a member of the resistance meets a Stranger. The partisan immediately admires the Stranger, and they spend the remainder of the evening and most of the night describing their childhoods, telling jokes, talking about each other's families, and sharing intimate thoughts about life. Toward the end of their time together, the Stranger tells the partisan that the Stranger is on the side of the resistance, in fact, that she is the lynch pin of the plan to overthrow the enemy in all the countries in which the great war is being waged. It is vital, the Stranger says, that everyone trust in her as the leader. The partisan is impressed, indeed, overwhelmed by the Stranger. He believes her with all his heart and commits himself to live as she wants him to live in order that her cause may be advanced.

The war wears on. The partisan and the Stranger meet on many occasions— sometimes more regularly than others but always frequently. The partisan's faith in the Stranger as the lynch pin of the movement grows. And he meets many others who believe likewise. The partisan and his peers—in fact most everyone he knows in the resistance—take the Stranger at her word. She is the leader of the resistance.

After many years of struggle, the partisan hears rumors of the Others— members of the resistance in other countries, or citizens of those countries, who do not believe as the partisan and his friends do. Some of the Others believe that the Stranger is not the leader of the resistance—another person holds the role. Some believe that there is no leader of the resistance at all. The remaining Others hold that there is no resistance, and perhaps no need for a resistance. A few even disbelieve the war.

The partisan meets some of the Others. And he reads serious studies of the Others's thought. Slowly, he comes to believe that many of the Others are justified in their beliefs, just as the partisan is, so far as he can tell. Although at first the partisan finds the existence of the Others's beliefs troubling, he does not know why. When the partisan asks the Stranger about this, he gets no reply, except an appeal to his past experience and those of the community. At first, the partisan holds to his faith in the Stranger. Later, as he gives the

problem more thought, he modifies his belief so that somehow both the Stranger and her competitors turn out to be leaders. But there are just too many problems, for he is a realist. And so, one morning over coffee, he loses his faith in the Stranger. He believes no more.[16]

The realist Christian is tempted, of course, as the partisan is. But the partisan has good evidence that the Stranger is the one, true leader of the resistance. He has met her, often and regularly. The fact that the Others have not met her, or met someone else, does not, if the Alston-Plantinga platform is correct, remove the partisan's justification or warrant (although it may lower it somewhat). But it would be hard to put complete trust in the Stranger, especially given the lack of response from the Stranger when she is asked for clarification. Still the partisan has no reason to believe in one of the other candidates for leader, nor yet to believe that there is no leader at all. And he has cast his lot in with the Stranger. In this case, contrary to the way the parable ends, shouldn't the partisan stick with his belief and commitments? Let me hasten to add that the partisan *loses* his faith. The parable ends the way it does because beliefs are not, generally, in our voluntary control. However, let's assume, for a very short moment, that beliefs are in our control. It is easier to see, then, that the partisan faces a test. Perhaps it is a sort of accidental test. But we can modify the parable to make the test something more than accidental. Let us continue.

The Stranger has picked the partisan for a special role in the new government to be set up after the war. Receiving this role is, however, contingent upon the partisan's being faithful to the Stranger during the war. Or perhaps the very continuation of the partisan's life after the war depends on his being faithful to the Stranger. The partisan knows this. In fact, the Stranger herself tells the partisan.

These modifications make the parable more analogous to the case of the realist Christian and the existential problem of plurality. What should the partisan do? Should he be faithful in his beliefs and commitments or should he become the follower of another "leader?" Or should he give up belief and commitment altogether? The rational thing, it seems, is to keep believing. But here we hit up against our assumption. We cannot always control our beliefs, even when the case for keeping them is a good one, epistemically and practically. Even with the stronger case, the partisan may still lose his beliefs over coffee one morning. What then?

Plantinga makes a helpful distinction between beliefs and acceptances. He writes:

> Consider a Christian beset by doubts. He has a hard time believing certain crucial Christian claims—perhaps the teaching that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. Upon calling that belief to mind, he finds it cold, lifeless, without warmth or attractiveness. Nonetheless he is committed

to this belief; it is his position; if you ask him what he thinks about it, he will unhesitatingly endorse it. He has, so to speak, thrown in his lot with it. Let us say that he *accepts* this proposition, even though when he is assailed by doubt, he may fail to *believe* it—at any rate explicitly—to any appreciable degree. His commitment to this proposition may be much stronger than his explicit and occurrent belief in it; so these two—that is, acceptance and belief—must be distinguished.[17]

Plantinga says little else about this distinction. Nevertheless, we can extract from his example that beliefs have warmth, attractiveness, and liveliness whereas acceptances do not. One can also, apparently, doubt that *p* is true and yet accept it, but (employing the same notion of doubt) one cannot doubt *p* and yet believe it.

Armed with this distinction, the partisan may continue on with his work for the Stranger, by acting on his acceptances rather than his beliefs. And just so can the Christian who faces the existential problem of religious plurality continue in faithfulness to God by working on the basis of his acceptances rather than his beliefs.

In "The Virtue of Faith,"[18] Robert Adams suggests that the core of faith is trust. Trust, however, is a gift. So far forth, faith is not within our voluntary control. In a response to Adams, James Muyskens argues that it is not because of trust but because of fidelity that faith is a virtue. Fidelity is voluntary, whereas trust, as a gift, is not.[19] I would like to suggest that trust and fidelity are parallel to belief and acceptance. It is in virtue of the latter from each of these pairs that one can hold onto one's commitment to God.

It is often suggested that the nature of theistic belief is more complicated than our more ordinary beliefs in propositions. The biblical symbols, as noted above, connect theistic belief to marital relationships. The analogy between marital faithfulness and spiritual faithfulness is worth exploring, not only with regard to belief, but also with regard to acceptance.

I believe in my wife, much in the same way that I believe in God. I love her, I react to her wants and desires, I listen to her, and so forth. I do likewise with God. I love him, I move on (what I take to be) his wants and desires, I listen to him, and so forth. But with my wife I also evaluate my actions and thoughts through her concerns. This is not always conscious. Neither is it always done with passionate *belief*. There are things, for example, that I simply *accept* about my wife, and that I do not necessarily believe, at least occurrently. I accept that she will act in certain ways toward me, I accept that her character will be more or less consistent over a period of time, and so forth.

Now it seems to me that I have not always accepted these things. Prior to my having come to accept them, I believed them. It was much more important to me, in the relative immaturity of our early relationship, to have these things before my mind's eye as things to which I was attracted, as things that I found

warm. But it was when I moved from explicitly believing these things to accepting them that the beginnings of real maturity in my marriage became possible. It was by my very *acceptance* of them that I began to recognize my deep commitment to them and, by extension, to her. This is not, of course, to say that I never have the propositional attitude of belief toward these things. It is only to say that often I do not and that the lack of belief does not adversely affect the good relationship I have with my wife, and, in fact, sometimes allows for an increase in the maturity of the relationship.

Likewise with belief in God. The mature believer accepts certain things about God, his nature, his character, and so forth. He or she need not believe them in the explicit, conscious sense to which Plantinga makes reference. This is why in Plantinga's example of the doubting Christian, the doubter has not lost his faith. He accepts the problematic proposition; he has thrown in his lot with it.[20]

Some might think of acceptance as a less important propositional attitude than belief. This, I suggest, is not the case, at least not for all acceptances. That there is a material world, that there are other persons, that we have some principles by which knowledge can advance, are acceptances of which we are largely not conscious; our propositional attitude toward them is not as explicit as belief is. Yet we do not treat them lightly *when they are challenged*. The religious believer in Plantinga's example still accepts, although doubts, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Belief may come and go; it waxes and wanes with the times. But acceptances do not, or at least need not.[21]

And so the descriptive realist Christian facing the truth claims of other religions may accept, though doubt, that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, the only path to the Father. This is fidelity to one's commitments, and hence to God. But of course, one's beliefs may return as well. Plantinga suggests that a "fresh or heightened awareness of the facts of religious plurality could bring about a reappraisal of one's religious life, a reawakening, a new or renewed and deepened grasp and apprehension of" the central truths of Christianity.[22] And so it may. But to turn away from God in infidelity is, so I have suggested, the sin of idolatry, rooted in our finitude. Such idolatry is a religious, rather than a moral, break with God. The appropriate descriptive realist Christian response to the temptation is simply faithfulness, even where belief may be lacking.[23]

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NOTES

1. Of course, not all religions hold that all of their descriptive claims are true. Hinduism, for example, allows for many "phenomenal" accounts of ultimate reality, none of which

are true, at least in the fullest sense. Nevertheless, this general claim about Hinduism's descriptive claims stands in disagreement with the beliefs of at least some exclusivist Christians.

2. Another way of discussing these issues is found in the work of Schubert Ogden. He suggests that exclusivism (salvation only by belief in the Christ event) and inclusivism (salvation either by belief in the Christ event or on the basis of the Christ event, but where truth lies in Christianity only) are monistic ways of understanding the truth of Christianity. Pluralism, in contrast, is not monistic but claims that more than one religion is true. A fourth option Ogden develops and defends contrasts with these in that more than one religion *can* be true (withholding judgment as to whether any given religion *is* true). On Ogden's way of viewing the options, exclusivism and inclusivism seem to be the realist positions, at least in the sense that the claims of Scripture are taken as more-or-less face value truths. Pluralism and the fourth way are not realist positions, or at least are less obviously so, since the claims of Scripture are not taken as face-value truth claims. Truth lies in the existential claims of Scripture, which lie behind or under Scripture. (See Schubert M. Ogden, *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?*, Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992.) What I will call "descriptive realist Christians" are Ogden's exclusivists, although his inclusivists may have similar or the same problems as the exclusivists.

3. See William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, chapter 7, and Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," forthcoming in a book of essays honoring William Alston, p. 26 (typescript). I discuss this issue at some length in *Rationality and Theistic Belief: An Essay on Reformed Epistemology*, Cornell University Press, 1993.

4. See Marilyn McCord Adams, "Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 5, April 1988, pp. 121-43.

5. See my "The Limits of Theistic Experience: An Epistemic Basis of Theistic Pluralism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 1993.

6. See William P. Alston, "Epistemic Circularity," in *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 342.

7. Marilyn McCord Adams, "Sin as Uncleanness," in *Philosophical Perspectives* 5, *Philosophy of Religion*, edited by James Tomberlin, Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing, 1992, p. 3.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 9. A connection between epistemic limits and the Fall is made by John Hick in *Evil and the God of Love* (revised edition) New York: Harper and Row, 1977, pp. 280-91.

9. Marilyn McCord Adams, "Theodicy Without Blame," *Philosophical Topics* 1988, pp. 224-25.

10. *Ibid.*

11. It may get God off the moral hook as well, at least in the instance of any evil resulting from religious plurality. Some Christians distinguish between God's testing humans and God's tempting humans, adding that God tests but does not tempt. The idea is that a test is not a test unto evil whereas a temptation *is* a temptation unto evil. God is not, of course, interested in tempting us to evil. But a test is good, since it can lead to the maturing of the testee. However, what happens if we fail a test from God? According to the sketch

drawn here, we sin. Such sin may or may not involve moral evil. If it does, as apparently happened in the Garden, then is God tempting Adam and Eve to moral evil, putting God on the hook? It might be suggested that, in a curious sort of way, whether God is testing us or tempting us turns on our response and whether that response leads to moral evil. If we pass the test, it is just a test. If we fail, and it leads to moral evil, then it is a temptation. Is the test of religious plurality a test from God for our maturity or a temptation to evil? If we fail the test, evil results. But it is not clearly moral evil. But if the realist Christian is right, the evil that results is the loss of one's salvation. But this isn't moral evil. It is a religious or ontological one, an unwillingness to live within our created natures, our finitude. So once again, God is not tempting us to moral evil, but simply testing us in our nature. God is not, then, responsible for moral evil, if we lose our salvation. We simply reap the natural, ontological rewards of finitude. This is, I believe, consonant with Adams's suggestions in the articles I've discussed in the text.

12. "Theodicy Without Blame," p. 236.

13. Professor Mike McClymond pointed out to me that many Christians do not leave their faith for atheism or agnosticism but, now-a-days, for some set of New Age commitments. This is, no doubt, true. However, among college-educated people I suspect naturalism, agnosticism, or atheism still have the strongest pull. And these are certainly the positions with the strongest attractions for me, after Christianity. Professor McClymond is also responsible for recalling my attention to Hinduism's account of the truth of their descriptive claims, a point that resulted in note 1.

14. There is much more to be said here. For one thing, there are, it seems to me, immoralities involved in adultery, or least there typically are. For example, if in one's marital vows one promises to be faithful, then adultery will turn out to involve breaking a promise. There is also a great deal of hurt caused by adultery. But what I mean to suggest in the text is that in its primary function, either as an act committed or as one prohibited, adultery is religiously wrong. One could have a marriage in which, I presume, no vows are exchanged and the couple is psychologically or emotionally immune to certain kinds of hurt. One supposes that so-called "open marriages" are intended to be more or less like this. In such cases, there would be no immorality involved in adultery.

15. Because of our contemporary temptation when facing plurality to turn away from religious commitment altogether, it may turn out that the sins of idolatry committed by the ancient Israelites are less serious than ours. At least the Israelites believed they were worshipping beings who were divine, whereas we simply give up on the divine altogether, or at least some of us do. One of the differences between our contemporary situation and that of Adam and Eve is that they were simply tempted to put themselves on the level of God and yet still recognize that God existed. We simply think ourselves ontologically and epistemically beyond what we really are. There is, we think, no divine.

16. This parable is, obviously, greatly indebted to the one given by Basil Mitchell in his contribution to "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by Antony Flew and Alyasdair MacIntyre, New York: Macmillan, 1955.

17. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, p. 37.

18. Robert M. Adams, "The Virtue of Faith," in *Faith and Philosophy* 1, January 1984, pp. 3-15.

19. James Muyskens, "What is Virtuous about Faith?" in *Faith and Philosophy* 2, January 1985, pp. 43-52.

20. There are some other possibilities here. One might, for example, have dispositional beliefs about God which, although not conscious, exclude doubt. But again, these beliefs may not be within our control whereas acceptances are.

21. These last few paragraphs make points similar to some found in *Rationality and Theistic Belief: An Essay on Reformed Epistemology*.

22. "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," p. 27 (typescript).

23. This paper is better for the comments of Philip Quinn, Saranidranath Tagore, and two anonymous reviewers for *Faith and Philosophy*.