

Multiplicity and Creativity: A Jain-Inspired Approach to Religious Pluralism

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I. The Problem of Religious Violence

Why has religion contributed so much to violent, destructive, oppressive human behavior over the course of history? Is there a way to negate or transform the destructive side of religion? For religion is a force that has also done much to advance human creativity, to promote and cultivate our higher instincts toward compassion, empathy, and cooperation, as well as, one could argue, to establish us in relation to transcendental realities that both ground and fulfill our deepest spiritual aspirations.

More specifically, is there a way of conceptualizing religious difference that can mitigate the tendency for such difference to become a catalyst for violent conflict? Why do we tend to react violently—even if only on an emotional level—whenever we encounter disagreement, particularly in the area of religion? I have argued elsewhere that this is due to the role that religion tends to play in the formation of our identities. Using the work of Amin Maalouf, the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, and the Buddhist idea of “no self,” I have argued that each of us is, at any given moment, a complex nexus of multiple allegiances (a term used by Maalouf), some of which are more prominent at one time and others at other times, but all of which make up the unique richness of who and what we are. So complex is this mix of allegiances that it connects us, in its totality, with every other being in the cosmos; for there is something that we share with all beings, and a multitude of things we share with our fellow human beings. However, in what could be called the primordial act of violence—violence to the self—we sometimes seize upon just one of these allegiances, identifying with it to the exclusion of all others. We thereby cut ourselves off from those in our shared human community with whom our other, repressed

allegiances would otherwise connect us. These persons thus become the alien “Other,” whereas those who share the one allegiance with which we identify become the “Self.”

This false and manufactured self, rooted in the act of reifying and identifying with just one of the multitude of allegiances that actually constitutes our complex being, stands in need of constant reassertion and protection. When this self is religious in nature, when the community with which one identifies exclusively is one’s religious community, then one has created conditions which allow the dehumanization of those who do not share the same religious identity as oneself, which in turn allows the religious “other” to become a potential target of one’s violence. A religion, even one that teaches nonviolence and love toward all other beings, thus becomes a mere token of identity—akin to the flag of a nation or the logo of a sports team. The actual content of the religion as a teaching and a way of life is subordinated to the more primal need to protect the self, which the religion has, in effect, come to symbolize. One then becomes capable of saying, “Our religion teaches love and nonviolence. But those others who believe differently are threatening it. Let us therefore destroy them to protect it—to protect ourselves.”

I have here briefly summarized and simplified a much more complex argument. I am claiming, essentially, that being mindful of all of the allegiances that constitute us at a given moment, and the ways in which these unite us with all other beings, is a necessary (though I would not say sufficient) condition for the elimination of religiously motivated violence.

The insufficiency of this approach is due to the fact that a host of external factors, often of a structural nature, condition our ability to assert control over our own, internal identity formation processes (and of course render problematic the very distinction that I just invoked here between “internal” and “external”—which I am using as a mere heuristic device). If one is living in a condition of severe social injustice or is in danger of actual, physical violence, this will certainly have an impact upon one’s ability to view oneself in the dispassionate and contemplative manner required by the model that I am suggesting.

This is of course all the more reason to work for the transformation of such conditions, so the *necessary* conditions—the real, primordial roots of violence in a false consciousness—can be eliminated.

Is there a philosophy, though, a way of looking at religion, that is conducive to the kind of contemplative process for whose necessity I am arguing? Again, philosophical or other conceptual arguments and models are certainly not sufficient to lead to a world free from religiously motivated violence. They do, however, play a role in the cultivation of actual, “real world” conditions. Again, the false self that is at the root of all violence is in need of constant reassertion and protection. Its insecurity and instability rest in the very fact that it is, in the end, a false construct. It therefore requires theologies, philosophies, and other kinds of intellectually persuasive devices in order to perpetuate itself. Contrary models can therefore be proposed—alternative interpretations of reality that are ultimately more persuasive due at least in part to their being rooted in a more profound and adequate understanding of the nature of existence. In the words of David Ray Griffin, “The human proclivity to evil in general, and to conflictual competition and ecological destruction in particular, can be greatly exacerbated or greatly mitigated by a world order and its world-view...We can therefore envision, without being naively utopian, a far better world order, with a far less dangerous trajectory, than the one we now have.”¹

One attempt to develop such an approach is that of the so-called “new atheists,” who argue that religion as such is inherently violent and irrational. Therefore, according to this understanding, if religion were to be eliminated by being decisively refuted as the false and destructive worldview that it is, the world would be a far more peaceful place. I am in sympathy with the new atheists to the extent that they are sincerely motivated by a desire to eliminate religion *as a source of violence*. I part company with them, however,

¹ David Ray Griffin, “Introduction to the SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought,” quoted in Nicholas F. Gier, *Spiritual Titanism: Indian, Chinese, and Western Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. xxv-xxvi.

in their desire to eliminate religion altogether; for I view religion as a source of at least as many positive outcomes as negative ones. I see religion, like science, as an instrument in the hands of human beings that can be used for great good or for great evil.

Furthermore, as Mark Jüergensmeyer has argued quite persuasively in his book on religiously motivated violence, *Terror in the Mind of God*, the attempt to diminish the influence of religion in public life has indeed been a factor in the global rise of religious violence. As he writes, “Perhaps understandably...in the wake of secularism, and after years of waiting in history’s wings, religion has made its reappearance as an ideology of social order in a dramatic fashion: violently...Religion gives spirit to public life and provides a beacon for moral order. At the same time, it needs the temper of rationality and fair play that Enlightenment values give to civil society. Thus religious violence cannot end until some accommodation can be forged between the two—some assertion of moderation in religion’s passion, and some acknowledgement of religion in elevating the spiritual and moral values of public life. In a curious way, then, the cure for religious violence may ultimately lie in a renewed appreciation for religion itself.”²

II. Multiplicity: The Question of Religious Diversity

If we concur, then, with Jüergensmeyer’s conclusion that the resolution of the problem of religious violence must include some positive appreciation for religion as a dimension of the human experience, and my argument that it is the repression of our multiple “selves” in favor of only one of our identities that creates the internal conditions for violence of all kinds, we are still left with the question of religious diversity. “Religion” is not only one thing, and certainly any attempt to promote religion in some generic sense will constitute a form of violence against religious multiplicity and particularity ultimately as pernicious as history’s failed attempts to remove religion from the public square altogether.

² Mark Jüergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (University of California Press, 2003), p. 243

Also, very importantly—and going beyond the aim of building a peaceful world that of course remains a central concern—there is the question of truth. People do not only follow or practice a religion to fulfill their psychological needs or to improve their lives in various ways, but because they believe it is true. This claim to truth needs to be taken seriously.

A philosophy of religion that aims to conceive of religion in a way that is conducive to a more peaceful and habitable world must therefore conceive of truth in a way that permits the variety of interpretations that the religions of the world offer us. To exclude religious interpretations of reality altogether, in the manner of the new atheists, is, as we have already seen, a non-starter, for it sustains the sense of threat to the religious self that can lead to violence of the kind with which we are all too familiar. To promote any one religious worldview against all others in an exclusivist manner is, however, equally a non-starter. Indeed, it is arguably this very approach that has contributed immeasurably to the history of religious violence, and to which anti-religious varieties of secularism are proposed as antidotes. It can be argued that any *closed* model of truth, which does not allow for the multiplicity of interpretations to which reality is subject, whether that model is religious or non-religious in nature, is unsatisfactory for our purposes. And again, let us not diminish the question of truth itself. The very fact that reality is conducive to the variety of interpretations that it is, is itself deeply philosophically interesting, pointing, I would argue, toward a complexity in the nature of reality that has real significance for our being in the world.

A persuasive philosophical model, however, that allows for the enormous variety of interpretations of reality that one finds in the world's religious belief systems, as well as the whole range of human philosophies and belief systems, including modern science, is a tall order. How does one respond to the many contradictions among the conflicting worldviews that the range of human belief systems propose? And how does one do so in a way that does not violate basic principles of logic that obtain across cultural boundaries

without also subordinating one view to another, as closed beliefs systems inevitably do? Finally, how does one make such a model as comprehensive as possible while at the same time making it an open model that does not foreclose possibilities or claim to answer all questions in advance? We do not wish to cut off new possibilities for dialogue and for the creative transformation of our understanding through the emergence of new insights gained from the process of inter-religious and inter-philosophical exchange and further life experience. Indeed, we wish to promote this creative and life-affirming process.

III. Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

The project of developing such an open, inclusive, pluralistic philosophy of religions is not a new one in the Western world. It has precedents in the Enlightenment itself, and in fact even earlier. When the early modern author, Michel de Montaigne, wrote that, “We are Christians by the same title that we are Perigordians or Germans,”³ he acknowledged that one’s religious affiliation is as much an accident of birth as is one’s nationality, and that the prejudice that one’s own faith tradition alone is the true path by which salvation is to be reached is just that: a prejudice. A devout Amish person from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania would probably be an equally devout Sunni Muslim if she had been born in Saudi Arabia, or an equally devout Theravada Buddhist if she had been born in Thailand, or an equally devout Hindu if she had been born into a Brahmin family in Tamil Nadu. The attempts of Enlightenment philosophers to develop the idea of “natural religion,” a shared set of universal moral values and beliefs underlying the variety of human religious experience, as well as the political philosophies of tolerance that were to provide the foundation for the enshrinement of religious liberty in democratic constitutional government, all stem from the felt need to develop an understanding of religion conducive to a society free from violent religious conflict.

³ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1993), p. 497

Such a project, however, is even more ancient among the intellectual traditions of India. Going back to the third century BCE emperor Aśoka, who proclaimed a policy of support for *dharma* in all its forms, one can find a tradition in pre-modern South Asia that sees many belief systems and forms of practice as paths to a shared goal: the ideal state of freedom from suffering known variously as *mokṣa*, or freedom, *nirvāṇa*, or absorption, or *brahmanirvāṇa*, absorption in the divine ground of being, or as it is known among many practitioners today, God-realization. And of course there is the ancient dictum of the *Rg Veda* that “Reality is one, though the wise call it by many names.”⁴

To be sure, not all systems of traditional Indian philosophy share this pluralistic approach, nor do those systems that do tend to advocate it always do so consistently. We are talking about traditions that have existed for many centuries, and that have been re-affirmed and reconstructed through many generations of intellectuals who could not be expected to agree with one another in every particular of their belief systems, even within the same tradition or teaching lineage. Inter- and intra-traditional polemic abounds in the philosophical and theological literature of pre-modern Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain authors. A tradition of pluralism—or at least of inclusivism—nevertheless remains a prominent part of philosophical and religious discourse in pre-modern South Asia.

This tradition is re-asserted with particular strength in the modern period, for a variety of complex reasons, and comes to be seen by scholars as an identifying quality of Indic religions. It is with Ramakrishna’s teaching in the nineteenth century of what his tradition calls “the harmony of religions,” as transmitted to the West by his pre-eminent disciple, Swami Vivekananda, that the idea of a philosophy of religious pluralism begins to take firm hold in the Western world.

The pre-eminent advocate of this approach in the early and mid-twentieth century was philosopher and author Aldous Huxley, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda and a

⁴ *Rg Veda* 1.164: 46c

British expatriate who settled in California and, along with his colleague, Christopher Isherwood, became a major fixture at the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

Huxley's classic work, *The Perennial Philosophy*, defends the ideal of a harmony of religions by arguing that there is a shared core of experiential wisdom at the heart of all the world's religious traditions, whose texts he quotes quite liberally in order to prove the existence of "the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being."⁵

Huxley's approach, widely known as *perennialism*, exerted a strong influence on several prominent philosophers, theologians, and scholars of religion, including Huston Smith, Joseph Campbell, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and John Hick.

John Hick took Huxley's approach and sought to improve upon it, developing it into a full-blown systematic philosophy of religion. One of the main criticisms of Huxley is that the scriptural texts that he cites from the world's religions are often taken out of context, making the world's religions appear more convergent and harmonious than they, in fact, often are. Hick replaces this approach with his "pluralistic hypothesis."⁶

Hick—again, very much intellectually in the lineage of Huxley, Vivekananda, and ultimately, Ramakrishna—proposes what he calls a "Copernican revolution" in the ways in which religious traditions see themselves in relation to truth and ultimate reality. Just as people in medieval Europe widely believed that the earth was the center of the universe, around which the sun revolved, being convinced only gradually by Copernicus' view that the earth is just one planet among many revolving around the sun, Hick similarly claims that religions traditionally identify themselves with the truth, in terms of which all other

⁵ Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009) p. vii

⁶ This hypothesis is most fully developed in his Gifford Lectures, published as *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989).

religions are to be measured and either found praiseworthy or, all too often, wanting. But in place of this medieval model, Hick claims that the awareness that there is wisdom and goodness to be found in many religions, and that all religions, including one's own, have been used to justify evils such as war, slavery, persecution, and the oppression of women, should lead one to see one's own religion as just one more "planet" circling around the "sun" of the truth that shines upon all, to varying degrees and in varying ways.

Unfortunately Hick's approach does not allow one to say with any specificity just what the truth is, or might be. He essentially states that the nature of ultimate reality cannot be known, other than the fact that it transforms those who encounter it in positive ways, and thus leads to the emergence of the saints and sages of the world's religions.

Ultimate reality, Hick says, "cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive. None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of experience can literally apply to the un-experienceable ground of that realm."⁷

In one sense, Hick appears to be onto a very profound truth. His approach evokes the apophatic *neti neti* strategy found in the *Upaniṣads*. He seems to be talking about *nirguṇa Brahman*—that is, the highest reality that is beyond all *upādhis*, or all limiting and differentiating qualities. It is also clearly the case that by deferring the question of the nature of ultimate reality to a realm beyond direct human experience, Hick is seeking to negate the contradictions among the various conceptions of ultimate reality found in the world's religions. If we can agree that this reality is beyond our capacity to experience, and thus to know, then perhaps we can stop fighting about its true nature.

At the same time, though, Hick's denial that ultimate reality can be experienced as it truly is by those in human form, but only phenomenally, and as structured by human consciousness, directly contradicts the experiences of Ramakrishna, Bhagavān Mahāvīra,

⁷ Hick, p. 246

the Buddha, and numerous other sages and saints, of whom it is believed that they did, indeed, transcend the realm of name and form, to experience ultimate reality as it truly is, in its true nature. Any attempt to teach those who have not had this experience of course requires the teacher to resort to that with which his listeners are familiar, unless one takes a negative, apophatic, *neti neti* approach, as some of the sages of the *Upaniṣads* do, and as does the Buddha. But to say that one never does go beyond the realm of name and form, at least in this life, is to deny the experiences of many of the sages of the world's religions—the very sages whose teachings Hick's pluralistic hypothesis is intended to affirm. It also denies the experience of those contemporary practitioners who have achieved such a state of transcendence. See, for example, the works of Robert Forman on what he calls “pure consciousness events.”

If one does not take Hick's approach, however, deferring both the ultimate truth and the nature of the Real to the realm of “eschatological verification” (that is, the idea that we will finally know the truth of all of these things after we die), one is left with the greatest difficulty that religious pluralism raises: namely, the question of how it is that many different religions, all making different truth claims, can all be true in some sense, and lead to the same ultimate goal, even when they conceive of their goals in radically different terms.

Hick is to be credited with attempting the first Western articulation of a pluralistic philosophy of religions that seeks, in a systematic fashion, to meet the criteria that I have mentioned previously as desiderata for such a philosophy: that it address contradictions among the conflicting views that belief systems propose, that it do so in a way that does not violate basic principles of logic that obtain across cultural boundaries without also subordinating one view to another, and that it allow for fresh insights to emerge from the ongoing process of inter-religious dialogue and lived human experience.

It is my judgment, however—and I say this with all due respect for the enormity of Hick's achievement, and the courage that it took a Christian philosopher to articulate this

view arising from the evangelical milieu from which Hick began—that Hick’s philosophy fails to meet these three criteria. It does not address contradictions so much as dissolve them. To be sure, it ends debate on the nature of ultimate reality as substance or process, personal or impersonal, and so on. But it does so by simply silencing, rather than really addressing, the world’s religions and their various claims. In this regard, it is not all that different from the approach of the new atheists (with the important distinction that Hick believes there really is a reality *there* of which the religions are speaking, but that it is not a knowable reality). In placing ultimate reality beyond the realm of the knowable, Hick also seeks to avoid the logical contradictions that would be involved in asserting that the many religious views of ultimate reality are all simultaneously true: that it is both process *and* substance, both personal *and* impersonal.

Hick does not, however, avoid subordinating one view to another. A Kantian type of skepticism about the knowability of reality as it is in itself prevails over the views of a wide range of religious traditions—particularly their mystical traditions—that human beings can and do experience this reality directly, and that, in some cases (especially among the Indic religions), such experience is the *summum bonum* of human existence, the goal to which the spiritual path leads. Hick’s view also seems to comport better with impersonal views of ultimate reality, such as that affirmed in non-dualistic philosophies like Advaita Vedānta, as already suggested above, than with theistic religious traditions that affirm the ultimate importance of the experience of devotion and loving union with a personal deity, such as the *bhakti* traditions of Hinduism and the Abrahamic religions.

Finally, rather than being an open system that is conducive to further insight and conversation, Hick’s model seems to end such conversation; for no matter what insight one might think one will gain about the nature of ultimate reality by engaging in dialogue or embarking upon a spiritual practice, such insight will only refer to the phenomenal and not to the noumenal realm. According to this view, one can only skate on the surface of ultimate reality, rather than diving into its depths.

The question, then, is “Can we do better?” Can we develop a philosophical model of religious pluralism that affirms the truth and efficacy of many religious paths while at the same time avoiding logical contradictions and creating a foundation to support further dialogue and engagement among religious communities in a shared search for insight? It is my view that, among the Indian religious traditions—which have, as already mentioned, been doing this kind of thing for a very long time—the Jain tradition has developed a way of thinking about truth and its affirmation that fulfills, or at least points a way toward the fulfillment of, the criteria that we have set for ourselves. The doctrines of relativity, as I have called them—*anekāntavāda*, the doctrine of the complexity of reality, *nayavāda*, the doctrine of perspectives, and *syādvāda*, the doctrine of conditional predication—suggest, I argue, a more fruitful model for religious pluralism than either Huxley’s model or Hick’s.

IV. A Jain-Inspired Approach

Again, Hick’s model seeks to avoid the problem of the contradictions among the claims of the world’s religions about the nature of ultimate reality by, in effect, taking the nature of ultimate reality off the table as a possible topic of conversation. Post-liberal critics of Hick, such as George Lindbeck, argue that teachings about the nature of ultimate reality have only an “experiential-expressive” function in Hick’s model. That is, thinking about ultimate reality and approaching it in a particular way—as a loving personal deity, or as an impersonal ground of all being, or as the emergent and interdependent process of mutual co-arising—conditions religious experience and gives it the particular shape and structure that it has, as well as providing a vocabulary for the articulation of that experience after the fact. While one may grant, as I do, that doctrine certainly does function in the fashion that Hick’s model presupposes, this is not how most religious people have conceived of the teachings of their traditions for most of history—including representative intellectuals of religious traditions. People who approach ultimate reality as a loving personal deity do so because they believe that ultimate reality is a loving personal deity, and so on. In

order to avoid the problem of contradictory claims about the nature of ultimate reality, Hick defers all such questions to the realm of the inherently unknowable.

Hick's assumption, clearly, is that the same reality cannot be simultaneously both a personal loving deity and an impersonal ground of being, or a substance and a process, and so on. This is the same sensibility that underlies both the Brahmanical and Buddhist objections to the traditional Jain view of the nature of reality. The thirty-third verse of the second chapter of the second section of the *Brahma Sūtras*, for example, is generally taken to be a refutation of the Jain view of reality. It states that contrary qualities cannot obtain within the same substance, and the commentaries of the various Vedantic *ācāryas* take this to be an affirmation of the principle of non-contradiction: that it is not possible for *a* and *not-a* to be true in the same place, at the same time, and in the same sense. This affirmation of non-contradiction, however, does not refute the traditional Jain view.

Anekāntavāda, the Jain doctrine of the complexity of reality, as this is articulated and developed over the course of many centuries by generations of Jain intellectuals in a wide array of textual sources, teaches, essentially, that reality has many facets or aspects. Reality is complex, and indeed, this complexity is virtually infinite. There is that in a real entity which is impermanent, changing, and in a state of constant flux. There is also that in a real entity which is permanent, continuous, and unchanging. And the real entity as a whole is a complex synthesis of all of these aspects. The Buddhist traditions have tended to affirm the impermanent, changing nature of reality as an ongoing process of mutually dependent events, which only appear as solid and stable entities with continuous identity through time. Brahmanical—later known as Hindu—traditions have tended to affirm either a universe of multiple substances with unchanging, intrinsic traits, or, in the case of non-dualist or Advaita Vedānta, a single, unchanging universal substance which only appears as a universe of changing entities.

From a Jain perspective, both the Buddhist and Brahmanical views err inasmuch as they are *ekānta*—that is, absolutist or “one-sided,” affirming only one aspect of reality

as true and dismissing the other as mere appearance, or *māyā*. According to *anekānta-vāda*, a more adequate understanding of reality is one which integrates the varied facets that reveal themselves to our experience: which affirms both change *and* continuity, both process *and* substance, both personal *and* impersonal dimensions, and so on. That this is not a violation of the principle of non-contradiction is demonstrated when the Jains point out that they are not claiming that an entity is unchanging in the same sense in which it is changing, or personal in the same sense in which it is impersonal. Because an entity has many dimensions or aspects to its existence, one must be attentive to which dimension or aspect one is describing when one makes an affirmation about an entity's nature. It is not that either the Buddhists or the Brahmins are entirely incorrect in their respective claims about the nature of reality. There is a sense in which an entity is impermanent and one in which it is permanent. But they have made one part of an entity define its whole nature.

One can clearly see here an analogy between the Jain critique of absolutist views of reality and the perspective I described at the beginning of this paper on the causes of violence and the nature of identity. It is when we one-sidedly cling, in an absolutist way, to only one dimension of who and what we are, only one of the allegiances that make up our identity at a given time, that we cut ourselves off from others with whom we would otherwise feel a common bond. It is when we are unmindful of the qualities that make up our shared humanity and identify only with religion, nationality, ethnicity, or some other *upādhi* or limiting quality, that we make possible the dehumanization of the other and are then able, at least within our minds, to conceive of the other as the possible object of our violence, thus creating an essential condition for actual violence in the world. And it is when we focus only on our human qualities—as I believe a good Jain would want to point out—that it becomes possible for us to blind ourselves to the pain of non-human life forms and to exploit them for our own purposes. Absolutism, defined as willful unmindfulness of the complexity of reality—the elevation of one aspect of reality at the expense of all the others—is the seed of all violence.

The complexity of reality—a metaphysical or ontological claim—has its corollary in the epistemic realm, the realm of knowledge, in the form of *nayavāda*, the Jain doctrine of perspectives. Each aspect of reality corresponds to a point of view from which it may be approached and known. Each such approach, in turn, corresponds to a worldview or a belief system that takes insight into this particular facet of reality as the core or kernel of truth around which it is constructed. Each worldview, with its corresponding practice, is a way to realize the truth of reality through one of its many aspects. In this way, the Jain tradition anticipates the nineteenth century teaching of Ramakrishna, *yato mat, tato path*: “As many worldviews, so many paths.” Buddhists approach ultimate reality through that dimension which consists of the impermanent, the changing, the interdependent. Advaita Vedāntins approach it through its changeless and eternal nature. And adherents of *bhakti yoga* and other devotional paths approach it as a supreme person.

Finally, if we understand, through *anekāntavāda*, that reality is complex and has many facets to which it cannot be reduced in its totality, and if we understand, through *nayavāda*, that each of these facets represents an entry-point through which reality can be known through a practice that takes each facet as its chosen ideal, this entails a particular mode of speech that it is best to employ when speaking of ultimate reality to those whose commitments and paths may differ from our own. This is the mode of speech taught by *syādvāda*, the doctrine of conditional predication. *Syāt* is an optative form of the Sanskrit verbal root *as*, or “be,” which means, “It could be,” “It may be,” “It might be,” or even “It should be.” In Jain technical philosophical usage, however, it means, “In one sense it is the case that...” Again, the Jain doctrines of relativity do not violate the principle of non-contradiction; for they do not assert that an entity has contrary qualities in the same sense, at the same time, or in the same place. According to *syādvāda*, if one predicates any quality of an entity and wishes to do so with proper philosophical precision, avoiding the kinds of one-sided claims that characterize other traditions and cause them to fall into the trap of inter-religious conflict, one needs to specify the sense in which that predicate

obtains. Thus, “An entity is impermanent inasmuch as it possesses particular qualities at one time but not at another.”

In other words, an entity is, in one sense (*syāt*) impermanent. In another sense, it is permanent. Taking into account both its impermanent and permanent aspects, it is both impermanent and permanent. Also, because an entity is infinitely complex, it possesses aspects that cannot be described in terms of impermanence and permanence.

To take another, perhaps more concrete example, is a human being an impersonal or a personal entity? In an obvious sense, a human being is a personal entity, possessing the qualities that we associate with personhood, such as agency, volition, and memory. In another sense, however, a human being is an impersonal entity, possessing impersonal characteristics, such as occupying a certain volume of space and a certain extent in time, having mass and density, and so on. Taking into account both personal and impersonal properties, a human being is both personal and impersonal. And because a human being is infinitely complex, it possesses aspects that cannot be described in terms of personhood or non-personhood.

When one encounters a religious or philosophical claim, therefore, that is contrary to one’s own view, the proper attitude to take is to adhere to one’s own view, but also to be open to the possibility that a kernel of truth—a genuine insight into an aspect of reality that one has not yet considered—must rest at the core of the worldview of the other. This is not relativism—throwing up one’s hands in despair and asking rhetorically, “Who really knows the truth?” Nor is it absolutism: clinging to one’s view while rejecting all others.

Pravrajika Vrajaprana, although speaking from the point of view of the Vedānta tradition of Ramakrishna, summarizes the consistent application of this Jain approach to religious diversity when she writes that, “The world’s spiritual traditions are like different pieces in a giant jigsaw puzzle: each piece is different and each piece is essential to complete the whole picture. Each piece is to be honored and respected while holding firm to our own particular piece of the puzzle. We can deepen our own spirituality and learn

about our own tradition by studying other faiths. Just as importantly, by studying our own tradition well, we are better able to appreciate the truth in other traditions...This is not to say that all religions are ‘pretty much the same.’ That is an affront to the distinct beauty and individual greatness of each of the world’s spiritual traditions. Saying that every religion is equally true and authentic doesn’t mean that one can be substituted for the other like generic brands of aspirin.”⁸

A Jain-inspired philosophy of religious pluralism, that takes *anekāntavāda*, *naya-vāda*, and *syādvāda* as guiding principles, arguably meets the three criteria established for such philosophies earlier in this paper.

First, it addresses the contradictions among the conflicting views that various belief systems propose. Indeed, this is its central purpose. It achieves this by affirming a metaphysics of complexity which allows the apparently contradictory claims of various worldviews to be true by assigning each of them a sphere of truth: a sense in which they are, indeed, true, but not absolutely so. They are true of the aspects of reality to which they refer, but they cannot necessarily be applied to other dimensions of being that are not their primary focus. (This brings to mind a half-joking statement by the Dalai Lama to Hindu leaders that they were “the experts on self” and the Buddhists were “the experts on no self.” Each path has its own focus or area of expertise.) This emphasis on multiple aspects and multiple senses in which a claim can be true also avoids the issue of self-contradiction for the model itself.

Does this model avoid subordinating one view to another? One could argue that it does not—and that this is in fact an impossible goal; for as long as one is making any definite claim about the nature of reality, or even an aspect of reality, one is denying the truth of all claims that contradict it (such as a claim that reality is *not* complex or multifaceted). All philosophies of religious pluralism are, in at least this minimal sense, forms

⁸ Pravrajika Vrajaprana, *Vedanta: A Simple Introduction* (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1999), pp. 56-57

of *inclusivism*—that is, the view that there is a more comprehensive meta-view to which a variety of views may point or in which they may be said to participate. But one can also argue that inclusivist models can be either more or less affirming of the distinctive truths of the various systems of thought that they seek to subsume, and more or less open to the idea that there may be truths in other systems of which the inclusivist is not yet aware, at least until further dialogue and engagement with the other. As the late Wilhelm Halbfass has argued, the Jain model of inclusivism is also minimally hierarchical, situating other systems of thought within what he calls a “horizontal” model. “The Jainas present their own system not as the transcending culmination of lower stages of truth, but as the complete and comprehensive context, the full panorama which comprises other doctrines as partial truths or limited perspectives.”⁹ A sense of what is arguably a paternalistic notion of the superiority of one’s own view remains, but is mitigated by the removal of the kind of hierarchical ranking of other systems of thought characteristic of non-Jain doxographic literature in the pre-modern South Asian context. Again, such a sense is arguably unable to be avoided when one takes into account the logic of what it means to hold a position. If one did not think that one’s own view or tradition had any epistemic advantages at all, at least for oneself at this particular point in one’s spiritual journey, then one would cease to adhere to it.

Finally, a Jain-inspired model not only allows, it encourages—and arguably creates a mandate for—further dialogue and exploration of the many facets of reality.

V. Conclusion

Given limitations of time, I have been able to provide here only the barest sketch of the Jain-inspired model of religious pluralism on which I have been working throughout my career. My presentation no doubt raises many questions that I hope we can explore in the time dedicated to discussion, some of which I have examined in my various publications

⁹ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 414

and papers over the years. Despite the wish of many contemporary Jains to advance the doctrines of relativity as a philosophy of nonviolence in the realm of religious discourse, a form of “intellectual *ahimsā*,” to use an increasingly common phrase, is it not the case that these doctrines historically evolved out of very different considerations—particularly the need to refute competing worldviews by showing them to be only partial views of the nature of reality, in contrast with the more comprehensive, and therefore superior, view of Jainism? Does this undermine contemporary attempts to deploy these doctrines in a constructive fashion? To what extent does utilizing a Jain-inspired approach to religious diversity commit one to a traditional Jain cosmology and practice? Does one need to be a Jain in order to use these ideas, or are they “transportable,” and so accessible to persons from a variety of traditional backgrounds, and with a variety of religious commitments? If one is accessing these Jain concepts in a constructive fashion, particular from a point of view that is not, strictly speaking, Jain, what ethical issues of representation does such an experiment raise for the scholar of religion? What are the limits of pluralistic openness to a variety of paths and worldviews? Do we want to say that Nazism, for example, is “in some sense true,” or the Charles Manson or Jonestown cults, or Heaven’s Gate? What do the Jain doctrines of relativity allow us to say is *not* true? Is there a point at which one stops applying the principle of *syādvāda* to one’s claims—a point at which one has in fact reached the kernel of absolute truth that is at the heart of a broader metaphysical or moral claim? Again, it is my hope to explore these questions, and many more, in the time that remains.

I will conclude these remarks by saying that I believe a Jain-inspired approach to religious and other forms of intellectual diversity holds out great hope for a discourse that is more accepting of the views of others than that which currently prevails in our global society, as well as for the creative advancement and transformation of that society toward a truth which is complex and is ever unfolding new possibilities for the flourishing and the enlightenment of all beings.