

Science, Religion, and Pluralism¹

- William Sweet²

Even in a world of mono-religion and mono-culture the relationship between science and religion is a matter of much controversy, as is evident from the many (e.g., conflict, compartmentalist, complementary, etc.) models proposed by different scholars. The matter becomes far more complex when one considers our contemporary world of religious pluralism and cultural diversity. Is it possible to have a meaningful and helpful relationship between science and religion in our contemporary world? Sweet discusses this problem and argues that this is possible provided we follow the coherence criterion of truth. Making use of some of the ideas of John Hick, he shows that since religious belief has an empirical dimension and a reference to the world, we can talk of a meaningful relationship between science and religion.

- Editor

Few debates spark as much popular interest, and yet seem to be as intractable, as the debate about the relation between science and religion. Not only do books, articles, book reviews, and public debates explore the matter at length, but they often do so in a rather intemperate way.

There have been very different responses to the question of the relation between science and religion. Some see the two as compatible and mutually supportive – and they point to how religion contributed to the birth of science, how the Christian worldview was essential to the development and growth of technology, and maintain that science can sometimes serve to support religious claims. Others argue that there is an incompatibility between science and religion – that there is no evidence,

empirical or otherwise, for most religious claims; that, as science progresses, less and less needs to be explained by referring to a religious hypothesis;³ and that science directly refutes a number of religious claims (such as the belief that the universe was created about six to ten thousand years ago). And some have insisted that there is an enormous chasm between science and religion – that each represents a worldview incommensurable with the other, and that one neither supports nor conflicts with the other.

But there is another ‘response’ to the problem, and that is to say that no answer is possible – not because science and religion are incommensurable, but because of the fact of religious pluralism.

In this paper, I want to consider whether the fact of religious plurality effectively puts an end to discussion about the relation of religion and science. I begin with a few comments on the phenomenon of the plurality of religions. Next, I present a response to this view – a response that draws on the view of John Hick, that one can acknowledge the existence of religious plurality, and yet still talk about religious truth. Hick’s view is interesting and valuable because it attempts to take both religious plurality and the claims of religion and science (or of empirical truth) seriously. I then argue that there are some problems with Hick’s view but that, despite these inadequacies, Hick nevertheless points to a number of important features of religious belief which, when taken into account, allow for the articulation of a robust view of religious belief and religious truth – a view that can help to address the challenge of describing a relation between science and religion, even in a cross or multi-cultural setting.

Religious Plurality

It is obvious that we live in a world of many cultures and that, in many countries, we find a multiplicity of religions and cultures as well. This phenomenon has given rise to a number of challenges when it comes to matters of scientific and religious truth.

For example, recently, a problem arose concerning a skeleton that had been discovered in the territory now occupied by a group of aboriginal

tribes, called the Lakota, in the Black Hills of the United States. After careful examination, anthropologists concluded that the skeleton was about 9,300 years old and was that of a member of an Indian tribe that had long before moved further south. But, according to Bronco Lebeau, a spokesperson for the Cheyenne River Sioux, a Lakota tribe, the Lakota reject the view that they migrated to the area and that another tribe had lived there before them. They believe that they are “descendants of the Buffalo people. [The Lakota] came from inside the earth after supernatural spirits prepared the world for humankind to live here.”²⁴ The Lakota therefore claimed that, based on the information obtained through oral tradition and “ceremonies that allow [them] to determine” whether a skeleton is that of a former member of the tribe, the skeleton was that of one of their ancestors, and that they had the right (under the United States Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990) to re-bury the remains according to their own ways.

In this case, we see a number of apparent conflicts that seem to be typical of many cases of the encounter between religion and science in the contemporary world. There is a disagreement or conflict between the anthropologists and the Lakota concerning the characteristics of the skeletal remains and which tribe they came from. There is also a conflict between the Lakota and the government (and, possibly, between, the Lakota and another tribe) concerning what should be done with the remains – i.e., to whom they should be returned. But there is an even greater disagreement here – and that is whether we can, without begging several important questions, prefer the claims of anthropology over aboriginal “creationism,” or vice-versa.

While one may think that what is at stake here is whether scientific belief is in conflict with religious belief, much more is involved. For, first, there are many religions, and the ways in which one might seek to resolve a conflict between science and religion so far as one religion is concerned, might not be appropriate when one is dealing with another religion, and the situation might not even count as a conflict so far as another might be concerned.

And, second, there is not only a plurality of views of what ‘religion’ is, but there is also a plurality of views of the nature of science. Thus, it

is not just that such situations (as the case of the Lakota) present a series of practical problems for adjudicating apparent conflicts between science and religion, but that the situations are so complex and the religious claims involved so diverse, that it is difficult to see how there could be any way to address the *theoretical* question of the relation between science and religion.

Consequently, some would claim that there can be no general answer to the question of the relation between science and religion. At best, one could say that, in some contexts, some claims that we might call 'religious' are compatible (or, as the case may be, support or conflict) with some claims that we might call scientific. But we would have to add that, given the plurality of religions (or religious ways of thinking) as well as the different views of the nature and meaning of scientific statements, it would be impossible to say what *the* relation is between religion and science in general.

Given the complexity of such a situation, is it possible to do anything other than arrive at a purely 'pragmatic' decision, on a case by case basis, concerning whether to prefer a scientific claim over a religious belief?

Hick and Pluralism

In light of the plurality of religions and worldviews that we find in contemporary culture, how are we to understand the claims made by adherents of different faiths? Does it make sense for one to say that these claims are not just expressions of sentiment or commitment of believers, but that some of them (also) are or might be true? And if these claims are the sort of remarks that can be true, can we say that some *religious beliefs* are true or are better than others? This is a matter which, in the last quarter century, John Hick has made some effort to address. And his answers to these questions bear on the more general issues of whether it makes sense to compare religious beliefs with scientific claims, and whether we can make any general statements about the relation of science and religion.

Confronted by the diversity of world religions and, in particular,

the different notions of salvation within them, John Hick has come to defend what has been called a 'religious pluralist' view.

According to Hick, there are three principal stances that one might take on the issue of religion and truth: religious exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Religious exclusivism – the view that only one religion is true, that it alone provides the sole means of access to salvation or spiritual liberation, and that those who are ignorant of it (i.e., the vast majority of humanity) will not be saved – is, he argues, inconsistent with a loving God.⁵ It is, in any event, implausible that any one tradition can be uniquely normative.⁶ Religious inclusivism – the view that only one religion is true, but that all other religions manifest that truth to some degree, and are themselves 'true' so far as they reflect it – is a more popular view among some thinkers, but Hick thinks that this is a rather ad hoc and post hoc way of trying to retain the superiority of one religion and yet not deny the obvious inspirational truths in other religions.⁷ Thus the only option left, Hick thinks, is religious pluralism – that there is no unique and best way of having access to the divine, but a multiplicity of ways, each of which provides a legitimate means of access to it. This option is plausible, Hick thinks, because it is both simple and most consistent with the hypothesis of a loving God and the general goal of having salvation available to people from all cultures. Thus Hick concludes that the best way of understanding the great world faiths is by seeing them as "different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the [same] Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human,"⁸ and one's particular faith or religion is part of one's "corporate self respect."⁹

In Hick's view, then, all major religions reflect this ultimate reality and, while there are obvious differences among them, we can explain such diversity by distinguishing "the Real as it is in itself and the Real as humanly thought and experienced."¹⁰ The differences among the great traditions are a matter of "religious ethnicity"¹¹ – of the particular circumstances in which 'the Real' became present (e.g., the specific experiences and events through which it became understood). But to say this is in no way to denigrate these differences, since all faith has to be articulated in some particular way.

Now my concern here is not Hick's interpretation of specific religious doctrines – e.g., of the godlike character of Krishna, or of the divinity of Jesus – but, first, how what Hick says about religious pluralism might be helpful in understanding the meaning and truth of utterances expressing religious belief and, second, what the proper attitude ought to be towards other worldviews (e.g., scientific and religious traditions).

So how, on Hick's account, can we say that a religion or religious belief is true? Or, to put it slightly differently, in what circumstances can one be said to have rational true religious belief? Hick provides an interesting response. He says that, even though we may not know exactly which beliefs are true, we needn't deny that there is religious truth.

Hick on Religion and Truth

Hick writes that every religion is a "package." It has a content – a salvation claim and a truth claim – and a packaging which identifies its sender and to whom the package is directed. This packaging – for example, the doctrines concerning who it is who is sending it – is not incidental or irrelevant to the religion. It is essential, but it is secondary.¹² The content – the soteriological aspect – is, however, primary, and it has both practical and cognitive elements.¹³ As practical, it proposes or commands a way of life which flows from the conception of the universe it presents. But it is also cognitive – it provides an experience of the Real, but also a basic vision of reality, around which intellectual systems (e.g., doctrines and dogmas) are gradually constructed.¹⁴

This analysis of religion leads Hick to identify three levels within religious traditions – the historical, the quasi historical, and that which concerns issues about ultimate reality and which reflects the salvific promise (i.e., ways of conceiving and experiencing or awareness of the divine¹⁵).

Now Hick holds that, at this third, 'deep,' level (as he has argued since the time of his earliest work), religious faith is not something propositional, but an "experiencing as" – an interpretation of experience.¹⁶ But while it is not propositional, one can say that, at this third 'deep' level, a faith can be "true." Some interpretations of experience are, in other words, right, and some are wrong.

How can we know whether an interpretation – a particular experience of the divine – is true? There are, it would seem, a number of methods to which one might appeal. There is what Hick and many others would call salvific transformation¹⁷ – that this experience is able to “possess our minds and hearts as to exhibit a transforming power in our lives.”¹⁸ There is also what Hick calls “eschatological verification” – an eventual evidential confirmation of religious claims that occurs at, or after, death – though he acknowledges that this does not provide us with any actual evidence in *this* life. Another method, Hick allows, is having a direct religious experience which, in turn, triggers a belief.¹⁹ This experiential justification is altogether appropriate because we are, Hick says, “religious animals,”²⁰ and so a religious vision of the universe is, at least, *prima facie* plausible. Besides, if one has such an experience, it is fallibilistic, and we can speak of belief having degrees of “well-groundedness” about it, reflecting the force and vivacity of the belief. But in the absence of any defeaters, to deny or reject such experience would be “a kind of cognitive suicide,”²¹ and one can say that it would be irrational to reject it. Still, none of these is what Hick would call rational or intellectual justification; only “interpretive systems of thought can be rationally scrutinized.”²²

But there is more to religion than what is reflected in this general level. There is, Hick thinks, no reason to believe that all authentic religious experience must be of the same kind and produce the same sets of beliefs.²³ For example, there is another level in religious traditions – where one focuses on religion not as an experience of something, but as an “interpretive system of thought” – and it is at this *quasi historical* level that one finds claims about (for example) the divinity of Jesus, or about the resurrection, or the incarnation. These claims, Hick says, can be rationally scrutinized, and one can even compare families of theories from different traditions. But in practice, while one can speak of such comparisons, because of the complexity and, at times, the difficulty of weighing the importance of some elements within one faith with other elements in other faiths – and because each system “accounts for some facts better than others”²⁴ – one cannot intellectually grade any ‘vision’ or ‘system of thought’ as a whole in relation to other systems of thought.

Finally, there is a more obviously *historical* level of a tradition – e.g., whether Jesus’ resurrected body was a reanimation of his physical, crucified body, or whether Muhammad appointed Ali as his successor. These concern matters that, in principle, might be able to be confirmed or refuted by historical evidence, though in fact it seems very unlikely that they ever will. But Hick adds that, in the preceding two examples, it is not necessary that we answer or that we be able to resolve these questions in order to be saved – that they are not of great religious (i.e., soteriological) importance.²⁵

It is, therefore, appropriate to speak of contradictions among religious traditions, but also of verification and falsification – particularly at the historical level. Religious systems of thought (e.g., concerning founding figures or systems of dogma) can be “graded”²⁶ in terms of how far they promote or hinder spiritual liberation. Still, while in principle it might be possible to speak of grading religions, we cannot in fact establish that one religion is better than another; and while we can argue, rationally, that some particular historical claims made by a religion are (or are not) actually true, the possibility of acquiring *all* of the relevant information to make such a determination is extremely unlikely. Thus we cannot assess religions – ways of conceiving and experiencing – as totalities. But this should be of no particular concern as there are no significant differences – i.e., differences relevant to the means of salvation or liberation – among religious traditions.

Now, there are cases where worldviews (including religious and scientific traditions) seem to conflict with one another – such as the Lakota case described above. How would Hick respond to such cases?

To begin with, supposing that there are genuine conflicts between two worldviews, it is fairly certain that Hick would see these as existing, not at the fundamental level, but at the quasi historical and/or historical level. Hick would likely say, however, that even though it is difficult to establish whether one or another belief (at these levels) is false, in some cases we can determine whether a religious belief is false, and we can know whether some positions are mistaken. (For example, in the case of the Lakota, Hick might say that a question like ‘How did this tribe come to be in this place?’ is a species of a general question such as

‘How do people come to be where they are?’ And while one cannot but have a speculative answer to the former question, the latter question is something that we can determine in a more scientific way – by observation and repeated experimentation. Thus, we can say that, in order for people to come to a certain place, such as Pune, they would arrive by walking, by aeroplane, by automobile, by boat, and so on. On the other hand, springing up out of the soil just isn’t one of the ways that we observe. So this provides us with a pretty good reason to say that, even if in the past it were true that people might have arrived in hitherto unimagined ways (e.g., by spaceship, by springing out of the soil), it would not be rational to prefer one of those explanations over one of the ways that we see today.

More generally, I suspect Hick would hold that, in order to adjudicate between apparently conflicting worldviews and/or religious traditions, we must realise i) that while there are probably different ways of experiencing God, of knowing the divine, and of grounding beliefs appropriate to each religious or world view, they must be at least compatible with one another, ii) that so far as religious belief has an historical or quasi historical character, it is subject to the criteria for truth and meaning found in *history*, and iii) that, so far as the empirical sciences (such as archaeology, anthropology, etc.) provide information relevant to *historical* truth and *historical* claims, they provide (as the case may be) positive evidence or warrant for, or disconfirming grounds against, *religion*.

Problems with Hick’s Account of Religion

A number of problems have been raised against Hick’s account of religion and religious truth.

Some have argued that it is a prescriptive account of religion rather than a descriptive one, and that it is in fact inconsistent with the major world religions which are either exclusivist or inclusivist about religious beliefs – particularly about beliefs dealing with salvation. Thus, contrary to Hick’s comment that it is not necessary that we answer (or be able to answer) various historical or quasi-historical questions in order to be saved – that they are not of great religious (i.e., soteriological) importance

– many believers would argue that it *does* make a difference to salvation whether Jesus had a human father or whether Muhammad appointed Ali, and so on.

Again, some have argued that Hick’s analysis begs the question of how and whether one can be sure that one has religious knowledge. It assumes at the very least that religious experience is an appropriate way to come to religious truth, but fails to provide clear criteria for establishing whether a purported example of such an experience actually is a (genuine) religious experience.

Others have held that Hick’s view simply reduces religion to the lowest common denominator – that it says that the sole point of religion is to overcome the self and to promote the wellbeing of others. But this is only a moral (and, at that, not a very helpful moral) claim.

Furthermore, when it comes to the case of conflicts like that involving the Lakota tribe, a critic might say that Hick’s analysis and probable ‘solution’ would be question begging – that the Lakota would simply deny that the claims about their origins could be taken as an instance of how one comes to be in a certain place. The Lakota would also undoubtedly insist that their origins were unique, and that questions of how to verify their account of how their tribe came to be where they are, are altogether irrelevant. They may even claim that there are other ways of ‘doing history’ than the way that archaeologists assume.

I am sympathetic to these criticisms, but I am not concerned with arguing for them here. These comments do, however, support the claim that Hick’s account is problematic in at least two additional respects. First, it does not clearly indicate *what* makes a religious experience genuinely religious (and, by extension, what would make an inspirational figure a *religious* figure). By saying that religion is only just a way of experiencing the world, all fundamental ways of experiencing the world would be called “religions” – and this is not helpful in distinguishing basic religious from basic non-religious commitments. Second, Hick’s account presupposes that one can, in fact, separate the three ‘levels’ or kinds of belief within a system of faith – whereas many believers might hold that one cannot do this, and that the three levels are, in fact, entirely integrated

with one another. For example, it is not obvious that one can separate the ‘historical’ component from Christianity and still say that what is left is religious (as distinct from ethical) in any way at all. Nor is it obvious that certain beliefs can be hived off or separated out from others without affecting their meaning and content. Indeed, it seems plausible to say that one’s deepest commitments and ways of seeing reality are ultimately bound up with a whole ‘web’ of beliefs, and that the erosion or change of several of them – even the most historical ones – would and does in fact lead people to abandon belief at the third level. If it is not a fact that, in Christianity, the Son of God “lived among us” (John 1:14) and if it was not a fact that Jesus died, then the Christian believer’s faith is, as Saint Paul said, “vain” (1 Corinthians 15:14). And if faith is in vain, then is not (on the moral ‘level’) everything permitted? These latter points clearly bear on the issues of the meaning of religious beliefs and the relevance of argument and evidence to belief.

There are, arguably, other relevant problems here with Hick’s view. One is that it seems that Hick’s notion of ‘truth’ shifts in meaning during his discussion of religious belief and truth – and that at times it disappears altogether, and is replaced by the notion of ‘rational belief.’ Another is that, in dealing with the truth of religion at the first or second level, the criterion of truth seems to be something like ‘correspondence to reality’ or ‘coherence with a state of existing affairs.’ But in dealing with religion at the third, deep, level, truth becomes something like what is ‘authentic.’ Yet another criticism is that, given the vagueness in Hick’s criteria for truth, it is difficult to say in what sense, if any, Hick’s pluralist view could be ‘true.’

There are, then, some strong reasons – at least, *prima facie* – for not embracing Hick’s alternative.

Advantages of Hick’s Account

Despite these reasons not to adopt in their entirety Hick’s views on religious truth and on the analysis of the nature of religious belief, there are a number of instructive features in his account.

First, according to Hick, it is appropriate to say that there are

understandings of ultimate reality that are true. Not only this, but it is clear that the criteria for truth and falsity of the first level – and even a second or third level – belief cannot be entirely internal. The reason for this is, in part, Hick's recognition that religion has an empirical dimension.

Second, Hick would admit that it does make sense to speak of verifying – or, perhaps better, falsifying – religious belief. Thus, if it turned out that there never was a man named Jesus, or that he never really died and was resurrected three days later, then it goes almost without saying that some central doctrines of the Christian religion (and arguably the religion itself) would have to be abandoned.

Third, as Hick recognises, the truth and falsity of certain beliefs can be determined, at least in part, externally to the 'system' in which the belief occurs. There can be, then, genuine cross cultural conflict – and cross cultural agreement – among religions and, by extension, conflict and agreement with other systems of belief (e.g., with scientific models).

If Hick is right on these points, then we have some evidence that religious plurality, as such, is *not* incompatible with religious truth. Yet Hick's account also entails that empirical testing or analysis is *not* always appropriate to discerning the truth of a religious belief – and, given the analysis of religious belief that I have been developing in this paper, Hick's views are plausible here.

In short, if we hope to find some resolution to the problem of whether and how the truth-claims of different religions conflict, and how to deal with the problem of religious pluralism and truth (e.g., with the case of what one is to do with the aboriginal skeleton and the Lakota tribe), we should take note of the instructive features of Hick's account of religion. But we must also do more, and determine precisely what a religious belief is, and what religious truth might mean in a pluralistic context.

A Second Model of Religious Truth

How, then, is one to address the challenge posed by those who point out that there are not only a multiplicity of religions and world

views, but a multiplicity of religious ‘truths,’ and a multiplicity of ways in which claims might be determined to be ‘truths,’ and therefore no way that we can talk about *the* relation of religion and science?

I would suggest the following – that, building on insights derived from Hick’s account, we can develop another view of religion and religious truth. This will allow us to avoid some of the apparent difficulties posed by the challenge of religious pluralism and provide a framework for articulating a relation between science and religion.

What Hick’s view has suggested to us is that religious belief can be understood in two senses – that which is roughly equivalent to ‘faith,’ but also that which involves particular beliefs (e.g., doctrines and dogmas).

The former – religious belief ‘as a whole’ – is roughly equivalent to the third and, arguably, some elements of the second of Hick’s levels (which, for reasons suggested above, I would argue cannot be separated from one another). Particular religious beliefs would be roughly the same as those which are to be found at Hick’s first level – though they would also include a number of beliefs from the second level.²⁷

But there is more to understanding religious belief and religious truth than this. As I have argued elsewhere,²⁸ an examination of religious belief and religious practice suggests that particular religious beliefs have two dimensions that must be included in any elaboration of their meaning. First, whether they are uttered in acts of praise or worship, in petitions or prayers, or in expressions of dogmas or explanations, religious beliefs have a descriptive and cognitive – frequently an empirical – element. They generally deal with, and are a response to phenomena that occur in, or affect, the world and they often involve facts about the world (e.g., the existence of certain individuals). It is this that allows such beliefs to be modified or even abandoned. One might say that on this, their descriptive or empirical side, religious beliefs are falsifiable in the sense that they may be discovered to be incompatible with how the world is, or with other beliefs held to be true, and for that reason they are rejected.

But religious beliefs have more to them than this. They reflect how believers have interpreted the world and serve to express this.

Religious beliefs are not, however, simply attitudes to or opinions about the world; they reflect the noetic or epistemological framework of the believer. For example, while the birth of a child may be seen by some as being of a purely causal and naturalistic character and significance, for others it may be seen as a ‘gift from God’ – even when it is the result of a ‘planned’ pregnancy. A person’s religious beliefs (or lack of them), then, reflect the framework through which he or she understands the birth, and one may believe that ‘This child is a gift from God’ – not in the sense that God was a direct causal agent in its coming to be, but as revealing the divine presence in the world. Thus, when believers utter religious beliefs, they both express where they stand and show how they understand the world. This latter dimension of religious belief – its interpretive and expressive character – both enlivens and deepens the former, descriptive dimension. Attempts to understand a religious belief by looking at only its descriptive side, leave out part of what it means and, hence, will fail in appreciating it as religious.

In general, what makes a religious belief religious is not just that it is intelligible and that it refers, directly or indirectly, to certain persons or events – for then beliefs like ‘Jesus had ten toes’ and ‘Mary was not the mother of God’ would be religious beliefs. To be religious, a belief must i) have an expressive role or function in a person’s life, ii) indicate one’s disposition or intention to act in a certain way that is relevant to a certain set of practices, and iii) be such that the persons or events referred to (are claimed by the speaker to) have a relation to a reality which is not restricted to the empirical, observable, and material. In other words, what makes a religious belief religious is not just its subject matter, i.e., that it is a belief about certain beings or events. Nor is it just that it is a belief or set of beliefs that is held in a certain way, i.e., in a way that expresses a trust or commitment that shows that the beliefs are fundamentally significant to one’s life.

We can speak of religious beliefs as true when i) they meet the general standards of cognitive meaningfulness (e.g., they are not self-contradictory or inconsistent), ii) they meet standards for truth and falsity set by not just the practices, but the traditions and institutions in which they appear, iii) that they are consistent or coherent with other beliefs (e.g., moral and empirical ones) in other discourses and practices,

and iv) that they reflect ‘the world’ – ‘what is.’ Thus, even though the meaning and truth of particular religious beliefs are initially determined within a religious discourse or tradition (e.g., as being coherent or incoherent with other beliefs in that discourse or tradition), they must ultimately meet standards that have their origin outside of that discourse. Since religious belief is a response to the world, and because particular religious beliefs have a cognitive and descriptive character, there must be some kind of commensurability between one religious tradition and another and, moreover, between religious beliefs and other worldviews (such as that presupposed in models of science).

Religion and Science

On the above account of religious belief, then, religious beliefs and empirical beliefs – and, more broadly, religion and science – are in the world, and in the same world. We can say that science and religion must have contact with one another, will affect one another, and will have a relation.

The relation of science and religion and the effect of the former on the latter can occur in a variety of ways. It is obvious, for example, that science affects us in a number of ways. It affects how we understand the world – that is, it provides us with a deeper understanding of the world around us. Moreover, science affects our language – our vocabulary and discourse – and this, in turn, affects the way in which we understand and express belief. Science also provides a warrant for certain facts about the world (e.g., social science tells us how we can come to reasonably hold certain beliefs about group behaviour; archeology tells us how we can reasonably hold certain beliefs about the past). Finally, one can say that science affects how we act in the world – it provides us with different ways of doing things and this in turn affects how we see and understand the world.

In each of these ways, then, science can influence how and to what extent we hold religious beliefs. We can, therefore, talk about whether believers are, in their ‘religious’ responses to the world in which they live, acting consistently or inconsistently (e.g., consistently with the empirical side of other beliefs). It seems appropriate, given the description

of religious belief proposed above, that science *has* such an effect on religious belief. If, as one finds in some modern Christian fundamentalisms, believers say that they refuse to let what is in the world alter their understanding of the contents of faith, one might ask whether this is consistent with their belief that God has entered the world (e.g., the incarnation) and continues to act in it, including acting through science and scientific discoveries.

What this implies is that science can confirm religious belief, and it can contradict it. But the fact that they are able to do this does not mean that either religion or science is reducible to the other.

What makes religious belief so ‘strong’ or what explains its being held ‘in place’ is not evidence or argument, but a whole web or system of beliefs. This is a reflection of the epistemological element of commitment or trust, and of its character as the means through which one interprets one’s experience. Thus, the amount of evidence one has for a particular belief or system of beliefs is not directly proportionate to the strength of one’s commitment or trust. It is, in short, its coherence – its coherence not just with other beliefs, but with ‘the world’ – that keeps it in place. But because religious beliefs have an empirical dimension, they are falsifiable. As one finds that one’s beliefs are inconsistent with what one knows, with one’s other beliefs, and with the way the world is, ‘the hold’ or the strength of one’s beliefs will, and should, change.

So, for example, in dealing with the case of the Lakota, a first step would be to see what their practices and beliefs are, and what they entail – not just religious practices and beliefs, but social practices, scientific practices, and the like. We might investigate what effect new experiences might have on what they already believe. Then, as we attempt to bring their own beliefs, their knowledge of the world, and their responses to new experience, together, we can see whether their considered views are consistent with one another (e.g., with their ‘creationism’) and with methods they may use to determine what is true or what is appropriate in a given situation. Changes in scientific and historical views – like changes in religious belief – may be some time in coming, and ‘showing’ what is right and what is wrong may

also take a long time. A failure to attempt to bring one's beliefs together in this way is not a sign of the incommensurability of one's beliefs with another, but of an ossification or fragmentation of belief. So this failure does not mean that there is no truth of the matter, or even that we have to wait on matters of urgency until everyone sees what has been 'shown.' Such a process, then, does not provide any quick results, but it would allow a way of addressing the difference between groups with radically different worldviews, such as the Lakota creationists and the archaeologists, without begging any questions. This is, no doubt, how, following the articulation of evolutionary theory in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scripture scholars were led to reconsider the understanding of the Biblical accounts of creation.

Truth in Science and Religion

The preceding account, I would argue, allows us to address not only the question of the compatibility between religious pluralism and claims of religious truth, but also that of the relation between science and religion. The account proposed is a kind of coherence view – and it allows us to explain both the relation of empirical evidence to religious belief and why the amount of evidence is not directly proportionate to the strength of the belief.

Science and religion clearly do affect one another. Now, sometimes a person may have a difficult time articulating precisely what his or her religious beliefs are, or what exactly they mean, or, given the different aspects or dimensions (i.e., the empirical or descriptive and expressive), how exactly to come to agreement about the truth of some belief. Moreover, when it comes to determining truth, the matter may not be so much about particular persons and events, but how beliefs about them are related to other beliefs, or what their implications are for how one should act, or for the practices one should engage in. Nevertheless, once one is clear about the meaning of a belief, we are in a position to determine whether it is true and in what way the conclusions of science may bear on it. Furthermore, if determining the meaning and truth of a belief involves coherence, then from what I have said, we have some guidance in discovering what the relation of religion and science might

be. By looking at this issue from the perspective of a coherence theory, we can see how religious belief can conflict or be compatible with science – in much the same way that religious belief can conflict with or be compatible with morality (e.g., in how one ought to treat animals or the environment). Incidentally, such a ‘coherence’ view of the meaning of belief has been embraced by Indian philosophers and European philosophers alike – e.g., it is the kind of view that would have been endorsed by J. C. P. D’Andrade, Hiralal Haldar, and perhaps Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, following the British idealist philosopher, F. H. Bradley.

Taking into account the views described above, then, we can see how to provide a general account of the relation between science and religion. What this says is that scientific belief bears on religious belief and vice versa, in virtue of the descriptive and cognitive character of both – that both deal, in some way and to some extent, with the world. How exactly a *specific* belief bears on another – whether it be to confirm, to contradict, to prove, or to refute – can obviously be determined only on a case by case basis.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that, while there is a multiplicity of religious traditions in the world, and despite their differences, one can rightly claim that there is a relation between science and religion. While the plurality of religions might suggest that there can be no general statement of the relation between science and religion, since (as Hick argues) there is no incompatibility between religious pluralism and truth, and since (on the description of religious belief provided above) religious belief has an empirical dimension and a reference to the world, we need not come to this sceptical conclusion.

We can say that religion and science ‘meet’ so far as they provide descriptions of – and suggest courses of action in – the world. It is in each person’s attempt to bring his or her beliefs into coherence that science and religion meet as well. We can say that scientific truth can count for or against religious truth, and vice versa (e.g., so far as science reflects what one might call the ‘scientific’ view of the world) – but not necessarily conclusively.

Despite the challenges of pluralism or of a cross-cultural setting, then, we can speak of scientific and religious truth, and a relation between science and religion.

Notes

- ¹ Earlier versions of this paper have been read to the Philosophy Departments at the Ateneo de Manila, Philippines, and at the University of Madras. I am grateful to those in attendance for their comments and questions.
- ² Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Centre for Philosophy, Theology, and Cultural Traditions, St Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia (B2G 2W5) Canada. E-mail: wsweet@stfx.ca
- ³ See the example of Pierre Simon Laplace, French mathematician and author of the 5 volume book, *Celestial Mechanics*. When presented with a copy, Napoleon allegedly commented, "I see no mention of God in this work." Laplace is reputed to have replied, "Sir, I have no need of that hypothesis."
- ⁴ See "Efforts of Archeologists Stymied by Indian Creation Myths," in *New York Times*, October 22, 1996,
- ⁵ John Hick, ed., "Jesus and the World Religions," in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 72.
- ⁶ John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1985), p. 73.
- ⁷ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 52-53.
- ⁸ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 47.
- ⁹ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 49.
- ¹⁰ John Hick, *The Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 14; cited in John Begley, "Philosophy of the World Religions: The Views of John Hick," *The Australian Catholic Record*, LXXIII/3 (July 1995), p. 313.
- ¹¹ *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 47.
- ¹² Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 46.
- ¹³ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 69.

- ¹⁴ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 70, 80.
- ¹⁵ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 90-91.
- ¹⁶ John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and the Rationality of Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy*, 10 (1993), pp. 242-3.
- ¹⁷ *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 78; *The Interpretation of Religion*, p. 14.
- ¹⁸ *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 77-78.
- ¹⁹ Here Hick is obviously agreeing with Alvin Plantinga's view of the rationality of basic religious belief. "Religious Pluralism and the Rationality of Religious Belief," pp. 242, 244.
- ²⁰ *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 74.
- ²¹ "Religious Pluralism and the Rationality of Religious Belief," p. 245.
- ²² *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 80-81.
- ²³ "Religious Pluralism and the Rationality of Religious Belief," p. 248.
- ²⁴ *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 81.
- ²⁵ *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 93-94.
- ²⁶ *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 86.
- ²⁷ These latter are the kinds of beliefs or utterances that believers use in performing certain acts or to express, bear witness to, or describe something involved in or about their beliefs as a whole. Such utterances are made in a variety of contexts – in petitionary prayer, in worship, praise, thanksgiving, in expressing moral judgements, in explaining events, and so on.
- ²⁸ William Sweet and Colin O'Connell "Empiricism, Fideism and the Nature of Religious Belief," *Sophia*, 31 (1992), pp. 1-15, and William Sweet, "Discourse and the Possibility of Religious Truth," in *Sophia*, 371 (1998), pp. 72-102.