

TOWARDS AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS*

PETER FORREST

Dept of Philosophy

University of New England, Armidale, N.S.W. Australia

The vast majority of human beings derive their religious convictions from participation in a tradition, into which they were either born or converted. An important, but largely neglected, topic, therefore, is when, if at all, such participation is warranted.¹ Quite a lot hangs on the answer to this question. For, as I shall make explicit, if it is warranted to participate in one tradition rather than another, that will, other things being equal, make it warranted to hold the beliefs characteristic of one tradition rather than another. Hence the religious pluralism advocated by Hick, among others, requires that this not be the case.²

1. TRADITION, RESPECT AND AUTHORITY

As a preliminary I need to consider the roles of intellectual authority. and intellectual respect. I start with what I call the *inference from respect*, which, putting it in the first person, goes like this:

I respect X
X claims that p,
Therefore p.

Here the first premiss is usually implicit, making the inference an enthymeme.

The inference from respect is a probable one, and like

other probable inferences, is defeasible. In particular if you respect equally a number of people who disagree, then the various inferences from respect will tend both to neutralize each other and to neutralize your own unreasoned opinion, resulting in a (defeasible) suspense of judgement.³

I take the inference from respect as defining *respect*. So to respect people in this sense is no more than implicitly to judge them reliable. Hence it does not require any admiration. Suppose someone is usually kindly but foolish but, occasionally in a burst of anger provides cruel but insightful comments on others. Then, in my stipulated sense, you should respect that person only when angry, not when being kind.

I define *authority* as that which has a high degree of respect. So you take various people as authorities on a given topic if you respect them highly and more highly than most people, including yourself.⁴ The inference from respect for authorities, if they agree, is thus highly probable and not subject to defeat merely as a result of respect for others who disagree with the authorities.⁵ For the authorities are respected more highly than those others. And this is the case even if you yourself initially disagree with the authorities. But unless the authority is treated as infallible, the inference from respect is still defeasible in other ways. In particular, if you have an argument against someone you treat as an authority then the inference from respect will tend to be defeated. The exception to this occurs if the authority is treated by you as *infallible* on the topic. In that case you take the inference from respect to be both conclusive and indefeasible. Claiming someone as an infallible authority need not result in a closed mind. For you might be prepared to lessen the degree of respect you have for that person, and hence to abandon your belief that the authority is infallible.

I have been considering the respect for persons, but in many religious traditions there is a respect for Scripture as such – not merely respect for the founder of the religion com-

bined with reliance on Scripture as an account of how the founder lived and what the founder taught. What I say about respect for persons also applies to respect for Scriptures, which are often taken as infallible provided they are interpreted correctly.

I also note that the higher the degree of respect the more vulnerable it is. If you just have a fairly high degree of respect for someone else, you can provide reasoned disagreement quite often without reducing the degree of respect, but if you often have reasons for disagreeing with someone for whom you initially have a very high degree of respect you should lessen that degree of respect. The extreme case is infallibility which cannot survive a single persistent reasoned disagreement on the topic for which infallibility had been granted. That is, it is not reasonable to maintain both belief in the infallibility of the authority on a given topic and the rejection of something proclaimed by the supposedly infallible authority on that topic.

Religions are traditions and, as such, propagate themselves by means of respect. This respect is often for a hierarchy which is treated as having authority, as in Catholicism, or for Scriptures, as in much of Protestantism. Is it warranted to have respect which is unreasoned (ie non-inferential or basic) or should it be reasoned (ie inferential or non-basic)?⁶ The answer is almost certainly that on *some* topics respect must be unreasoned. For we have so little information not partially derived from respect for others that any reasons for respect will almost inevitably themselves presuppose some respect. But not all respect is unreasoned. Our respect for secular experts, for instance, should be reasoned. For example, we should only respect the authority of a long range weather forecaster using a super computer if that authority can point to a good record of successful predictions. In other cases, such as medical experts, we would respect them as authorities as a result of their having been trained in a way that is largely unchallenged by the community.

I now ask: Is it warranted for religious authorities to have our unreasoned respect? I shall say that we participate *in an unreasoned way* in a tradition if we do indeed confer whatever degrees of respect are characteristic of the religion, and this respect is unreasoned. So for authority-based religions unreasoned participation requires the unreasoned acceptance of either persons or Scriptures as authorities. And that requires not merely that we have unreasoned respect for those who are the authorities but that, again without reasons, we have less respect for other people on the topic, including ourselves. I say we participate *in a reasoned way* if we confer whatever degrees of respect are characteristic of the religion, but this respect is reasoned. Clearly there can be mixtures, with respect for some authorities unreasoned and for others reasoned, but it is simpler to consider only the two extreme cases.

To the less reflective heirs of the Enlightenment no argument is required to show that the only warranted participation in a religious tradition would be a reasoned one. But, I suggest, they require no argument precisely because they themselves participate in an unreasoned way in their own tradition of suspicion of religious authority. This must surely cast considerable doubt on the claim that no argument is required. We should ask, then, what argument there might be.

The argument I shall be considering is based on what I call the Egalitarian Presumption (EP):

There is a presumption that you should accord equal respect to all who communicate their beliefs to you.⁷

To make EP fairly precise I stipulate that the presumption is overcome only by having reasons for increasing or lowering the presumptive degree of respect. Reasons for lowering respect might include the fact that the person concerned is a child, or an imbecile, or too much swayed by emotions.

Because it is indeed just a presumption, EP is quite compatible with the recognition that human beings are not equal in their intellectual capacities, and that such inequalities might well make some more worthy of respect than others. Once this compatibility is recognized EP has immense intuitive appeal and I shall be relying on a version of it.

EP is compatible with unreasoned participation in traditions which are not authority-based and where there are few if any known to you who do not participate in the tradition. For such traditions can be perpetuated by equal respect for all. But EP is incompatible with any authority-based tradition. For respect for another as an authority requires either an increase in respect for some or a decrease in respect for others. And, by EP, there is a presumption against either increase or decrease in respect, which presumption can only be overcome by giving reasons. EP is, however, compatible with reasoned participation in an authority-based tradition, even one which ascribes infallibility to some authority.

2. THE EGALITARIAN PRESUMPTION AND THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE

EP is intuitively appealing, but it is still far from clear what sorts of reasons overcome the presumption. Consider again the vulnerability of authority. An initial high degree of respect for an authority on a given topic is undermined if too often we have reasoned disagreement with the authority on that topic. That seems intuitively correct and the intuition is supported by the special case of a supposedly infallible authority where the extreme degree of respect must be rejected if you antecedently reject – and persist in rejecting – what the authority claims. So by a continuity argument it would seem that too much disagreement with them will undermine the status of even non-infallible authorities. If we grant this, then it is fairly likely that, by another continuity argument, severe enough disagreement must undermine even an ordinary

degree of respect. So if I make various claims then, for that very reason, I should cease to respect those who disagree with me too severely even if I cannot accuse them of opinionatedness, being too much swayed by the emotions, bad faith or any other intellectual vice. Let us call this a *tolerance-limiting* reason.

I now distinguish a *broad* from a *narrow* version of EP. Broad EP (BEP) permits tolerance-limiting reasons for not respecting others. Narrow EP (NEP) excludes them. Hence the continuity argument mentioned above should incline us initially towards BEP, but because it is far from conclusive we need to consider further whether BEP is acceptable.

If we are not careful, BEP can result in the following three-stage circular justification of participation in an authority-based religious tradition. The first stage is for the participant to make various claims out of respect for the authorities of the tradition. The second stage is to give tolerance-limiting reasons for not respecting (on religious topics) all who have severe disagreement with you. The third stage is to reason from one's respect for those who, by and large, agree with you to a claim, which most of them make, that we should take as authorities those designated as such by the tradition. For example, out of respect for the hierarchy, a Roman Catholic, Tom, could come to hold conservative Roman Catholic teaching on many issues. Therefore by BEP Tom could give tolerance-limiting reasons for respecting, on the topics of doctrine and religious practice, only fellow Catholics – and conservative ones at that. That is the second stage. The third stage is for Tom to reason by an inference from respect from fellow conservative Catholics to the further conclusion that the Catholic hierarchy are authorities on religious matters. Here it should be noted that were he to respect other groups of Christians then the inference from respect for one group would neutralize that for the other. So his lack of respect for other Christians is indeed required to reach the conclusion. In

this way a reasoned participation in Conservative Catholicism is justified in a circular fashion because it starts from respect for the authorities of that tradition.

I assume that we exclude such circular reasoning from BEP. Nonetheless BEP is, I say, still too undemanding in what it requires for a reasoned participation in a religious tradition. For consider Barb, who is not brought up in any religious tradition but who makes up her own mind on various religious issues, arriving at a version of pantheism. Given her isolation she has done extraordinarily well, but in fact her experience and her reasoning would have resulted in pantheism, had she heard of that position. Later on she gives tolerance-limiting reasons for respecting only pantheists. This is a non-circular reasoned participation and is in accordance with BEP, but I judge her to have been too casual or frivolous in the apportioning of respect. In many cases at least we should respect others and therefore question our own beliefs rather than give tolerance-limiting reasons for ceasing to respect them.

This rejection of BEP is in agreement with Hick's remark that 'the only reason for treating one's own tradition differently from others is the very human, but not very cogent, reason that it is one's own' (*An Interpretation of Religion*, p.235.) For the wholesale acceptance of tolerance-limiting reasons does amount to rejecting other traditions simply because they are incompatible with the authorities of one's own religion.

Should we, therefore, accept NEP? I submit that this is too strict. For if it applies to the case of religions it must apply quite generally. But there are many non-inferential claims which we would consider it quite unwarranted to compromise on. Here I would include some value judgements, as well as a core of 'common sense' views about the world around us and each other. Consider, for instance, those who claim that it is morally permissible to cause suffering to others just for

fun, or those who claim that some human beings are just imitation persons, the souls having left at the 'rapture of the saints'. I do not need to examine them for intellectual vices in order not to respect them. I will cease to respect them, on certain topics, precisely because of what they claim on those topics. I conclude, therefore, that NEP is too strict.

BEP is too permissive, NEP is too strict. We should, therefore, consider in just what circumstances it is casual or frivolous to give tolerance-limiting reasons. One circumstance would be if the disagreement was not about some unreasoned claim but about a claim which depended on an inference. In that case we should consider whether there is disagreement at the unreasoned level and if there is not, then we should argue from the agreed basis. Again, it seems frivolous to give an tolerance-limiting reason unless you were confident about the unreasoned claim over which there was disagreement. I suggest, therefore, a compromise (Middle EP or MEP) according to which tolerance-limiting reasons must be based on unreasoned knowledge claims. That is, disagreement is a reason for loss of respect if and only if the person we disagree with rejects a claim which is (i) unreasoned and (ii) held with confidence.⁸

I submit that the situation of the majority of people in contemporary Western culture is that their unreasoned knowledge claims on religious matters are few indeed, and that there is nothing unwarranted about such modesty.⁹ Members of some religious traditions might indeed forfeit respect by rejecting those unreasoned knowledge claims, or by being intellectually vicious or incompetent. But there will, presumably, be many different traditions which do not forfeit respect in these ways. Hence by MEP, warranted participation in any one religious tradition would have to be the result of non tolerance-limiting reasons for a higher than normal degree of respect. In the absence of such reasons the only warranted position would seem to be that in which any *unreasoned* religious

claims are shared by several equally respected traditions and in which more specific religious doctrines are reasoned to from that shared basis. We might call this *Strong Ecumenism*. I note two points concerning it. First because of the provision in MEP for sometimes giving tolerance-limiting reasons, the ecumenical respect need not cover *all* competing traditions. Second, it is a charter for philosophy of religion. For the less that is assumed without reason the more must be argued for.

3. A COMPARISON WITH HICK'S PLURALISM

Hick seems to accept something like MEP when he discusses the 'criteria by which one might judge and even grade the religious traditions' (*An Interpretation of Religion* p. 235.) And his position is in agreement with Strong Ecumenism.¹⁰ Before proceeding, I should just say where it is that I disagree with Hick, and why I am more confident than he is of the warrant of retaining a distinctive religious tradition including respect for its authorities. This concerns my explicit reliance on MEP with its admittance of unreasoned knowledge claims as a basis for tolerance-limiting reasons. Like Hick I think our current situation is one in which unreasoned knowledge claims of religious matters are indeed restricted to some rather general features shared by most if not all religions. When it comes to our judgements about reasoning, however, I neither find nor ask for tolerance.¹¹ Hick does not, for instance, withdraw his own reasoned case because he knows full well that others will reject it. Of course he is open-minded but his open-mindedness concerns further considerations of which he might be ignorant or the force of which he might not have attended to. As far as his argument goes he is, I assume, moderately confident. And he has every right to be. For we cannot reason about reasoning, even to reach sceptical conclusions, unless we are prepared to make some unreasoned knowledge claims about what is warranted.

There is, then, a dilemma for Hick. Either (1) we are entitled to have enough confidence in our judgements about reasoning to assess the evidence for the superiority of one tradition over another even though we know full well that others will assess it differently; or (2) reasoning is so impotent that even such principles as MEP have to be abandoned because there are others who disagree. In the first case we may well be more hopeful than Hick for the success of the project of seeking marks for the reliability of a tradition. In the second case there can be no useful discussion of just what is reasonable on matters of religion. In that case my project and Hick's both fall into the postmodernist quicksand.

4. MARKS OF RELIABLE TRADITIONS.¹²

There is only one way of combining MEP with the combination of: (1) rather modest unreasoned knowledge claims; and (2) treating as authorities those designated as such by a religious tradition. It is to provide non tolerance-limiting reasons for an especially high degree of respect for the tradition's designated authorities. But what reasons could these be? My tentative answer is that you should examine a tradition for the marks of reliability and accord its designated authorities an especially high degree of respect just in case the tradition exhibits these marks, which are of two kinds. On the one hand, there are those marks which directly support the thesis that the tradition is God-designed and hence, indirectly, that the tradition, as handed on by the designated authorities, is reliable. On the other hand, there are those marks which directly support the thesis that the tradition, as handed on by the designated authorities, is reliable which might in turn support the thesis that it is God-designed.

Marks of the first kind might include the corroboration of miracles. Suppose the situation is one in which normal human beings would take divine intervention as a mark of

divine approval of a religious tradition. Then if God intervened without in fact intending approval God would not merely be permitting the natural order to lead people astray, but God would be more directly responsible. Therefore, if we hold that God permits but does not directly bring about various evils – including the having of false beliefs – then because people naturally take a miracle as the seal of divine approval it is indeed the seal of divine approval. So in principle miracles might be used as a mark of divine approval.

Most of us believe in the miracles supporting a given tradition only because we already participate in that tradition. I say this not because I have in-principle Humean objections to accepting reports of the miraculous. It is just that all the reports I consider antecedently reliable are open to alternative interpretations. Suppose, for instance, that there are unusually many healings at Lourdes. Someone might take that to support not merely Roman Catholicism but a conservative sub-tradition in which Marian devotion is stressed. But although the healings may be interpreted as miraculous they can also be interpreted as faith healing or as some other paranormal phenomenon. So this mark is in fact of little value. Conversely while some of the events recorded in the Bible cannot be exactly as reported unless genuinely miraculous, the usual reason for acceptance is that you already belong to a tradition of fairly literal interpretation of the Bible. The feeding of the multitude with the loaves and fishes is of this kind.

A variant on the miraculous as a mark of reliability is the sociological miracle of the origin of certain traditions. To the extent that the sociology of religion cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of some change in a tradition or of the occurrence of a new one, to that extent we might take the tradition to be God-designed. Thus we do well to stress the ways in which Judaism differed from the religions of people with similar culture in the region.

Another mark of the first kind might be the tendency to foster sanctity.¹³ I find that more impressive than stories of miracles, and most of us have known saintly people. Here the tendency to foster sanctity is a *prediction* of many, perhaps all, the major world religions, which may, therefore, be tested in a way similar to scientific theories.¹⁴ To be sure the goal of sanctity will differ in different religions but that does not affect the argument, provided the goal is not easily achieved and the tradition predicts that its adherents will tend to achieve it. So one tradition might stress the resistance of temptation to do what is held wrong, another a warm and generous character, yet another serenity amid trials and tribulations. Or, rather differently, Christianity, especially the Lutheran sub-tradition, might stress the honest recognition of failings without complacent acceptance of them. Achieving any of these things is difficult without some special means, so success supports the tradition concerned. Conversely failure tends to undermine the tradition. What does not, of course, support the tradition is success at various tasks which are hard for most but which certain abnormal people relish, such as sitting on a pillar for a year or two, never talking, eating next to nothing, sticking spikes through tender body parts, and walking around naked in all weathers. There is nothing especially impressive about such feats.

Like Hick, I have been stressing the ethical aspects of sanctity. But sanctity also involves a sense of closeness to the divine, often resulting from religious experience. And what I said of the ethical aspects holds too of the sense of being close to the divine. Here it needs to be emphasized, however, that is there nothing especially impressive about those religious experiences, such as seeing visions or hearing voices, which can be explained as the result of the impact of antecedent religious beliefs on a schizophrenic personality.

An impressive mark of the second kind is serendipitous understanding. Suppose the tradition hands on a certain way

of understanding things, whether implicit or explicit, and you make the effort to decide if things can be understood this way. Then the fact that this does enable you to understand certain things, to 'make sense' of them as we say, reinforces your acceptance of the tradition. This can be treated naturalistically: intellectual behaviour is reinforced by intellectual gratification. But on reflection we may endorse this process of acceptance resulting from the understanding it gives. At least we may do so provided the way of understanding was not one we would have come up with ourselves. Such serendipitous understanding is at its most impressive when we start with a culturally determined tendency to reject the doctrine in question and, to our surprise, find it not the mumbo jumbo we thought but a way of understanding.

Examples of serendipitous understanding might be the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. In so far as Christianity provides a unique way of understanding, it is, I say, these two doctrines which provide it, by explaining what it is for God, the perfect being, to be an instance of perfect love. For the Trinity exhibits the perfection of loving harmony and the Incarnation the perfection of loving vulnerability. That there is a God who exhibits these two perfections is, I claim, an essential part of the best explanation of why there are beings like us in this wonderful but horribly flawed world. God creates out of love so that we shall eventually become part of the community of love which God already is. But no good God could allow the misery we humans suffer even for such a great good except for the willingness to suffer with us.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from serendipitous understanding are those doctrines which conflict with other deeply held convictions and so are unacceptable. For example, the idea that God predestines some to an undeserved beatific vision but leaves some to no more than they deserve, say a limbo-like natural fulfilment, strikes me as so unfair that it cannot be true.

Marks of these two kinds may, then, be seen as a way of testing the hypothesis that a certain religious tradition is God-given and so reliable as a source of religious insight, or that it is reliable and hence God-given.

SUMMARY

Starting from the acceptance of the Egalitarian Principle I exhibited a version which I considered too lax (BEP) and one I considered too strict (NEP), arriving at a version (MEP) which allows that there can be tolerance-limiting reasons for adhering to traditions but only if they are based on unreasoned knowledge claims. In fact, I hold that the situation most of us find ourselves in restricts such claims on religious topics to very general ones. Hence the choice between NEP and MEP is not significant.

It follows that we should take up one of two positions concerning religious traditions: either we argue from the shared assumptions of a variety of traditions without genuine participation in any of them; or we justify participation in one of them by noting various marks of reliability, such as serendipitous understanding.

ENDNOTES

- * A version of this paper was read at the Faith and Reason Conference held at the Catholic Institute in Strathfield, October 5 and 6, 1996. I would like to thank all who participated in the discussion of my paper on that occasion. I would also like to thank the anonymous referees for Sophia for their helpful comments.
- 1 William P. Alston in *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cornell University Press, 1991) stresses the central role of socially established doxastic practices (Ch 4). Participation in a tradition might well be taken to be just such a practice. Hence the topic has not been entirely neglected. Alston argues that there has to be a presumption in favour of

the beliefs generated by such established doxastic practices. I agree with Alston in cases where the doxastic practice is a 'black box', that is, where there is no analysis of the practice. But where we can analyse the practice then, as this paper shows, the structure of the practice raises further epistemological questions. Someone else who has written on the epistemology of religious traditions, although in an implicit fashion, is John Hick (See, for instance, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989). I compare my position with his in Section Three.

- 2 See *An Interpretation of Religion*. Hick's pluralism depends on the thesis that ultimate reality transcends human knowledge, which he develops in a Kantian context. For reasons I shall not go into here I reject Kant, but I am happy enough to accept that strictly speaking all religions are false. Or, more accurately, they are false unless prefaced by some such qualification as 'This is the highest degree of truth I can attain here and now'. In holding various Christian doctrines I am affirming them with precisely that qualification. Such a doctrine of degrees of truth is not, however, a version of Pluralism. See my 'Myand the Pluralist Predicament' (*Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 73, 1995)
- 3 For the details of such neutralization see *Rational Consensus in Science and Society*, Keith Lehrer and Carl Wagner, Reidel 1981. This neutralization would seem to be implicit in Hick's case for his version of Pluralism.
- 4 In some cases you could treat your former self as an authority, but I deny that your present self is ever an authority for you.
- 5 A high probability is not always accompanied by a strong capacity to resist defeat (resiliency or robustness). Moreover, there is not a uniform capacity to resist defeat: it depends on the sort of potential defeaters being resisted. For present purposes it will do no harm to assume that respect for an authority requires ascribing both a high probability and a strong capacity to resist defeat; and it will do no harm to ignore the question of just what sort of defeaters are being considered.
- 6 I use the term 'unreasoned' rather than 'non-inferential' or 'basic' because the phrase 'unreasoned participation in a tradition' sounds more familiar than 'non-inferential participation' or 'basic participation'.

- 7 If you prefer, restrict the presumption to all normal adults. For present purposes it makes no difference.
- 8 There are some alternatives here. We might consider the obvious, the evident, or the non-negotiable in place of knowledge claims. But I do not think it will make much difference.
- 9 People might claim to know (without reasons) that there is something divine, to know that life has meaning, or to know that nothing matters more than being compassionate. That will restrict the community of respect somewhat. But few would claim, without reasons, to *know* God is a trinity, or to *know* that Jesus was divine as well as human.
- 10 He discusses this in Part Five where, however, he does not find any marks of the superiority of any of the great religious traditions over others.
- 11 My conjecture is that people vary widely on this. A small but significant group do have the sort of unreasoned confidence in the details of their religious beliefs which I am excluding from 'our current situation'. Conversely, probably only a minority (philosophers – but not just academic ones) have the confidence on matters of reasoning that I am asserting. Fortunately by adhering to MEP I need not be threatened either by those with unreasoned confidence in the details of their religious beliefs nor by others who lack unreasoned confidence on matters of reasoning.
- 12 As Jim Franklin has pointed out to me this exercise of finding marks of reliability is similar to some of the teaching of old-fashioned Catholic catechisms.
- 13 Compare Hick's position on sanctity: 'The criterion of saintliness... enables us to recognize the great traditions as areas of salvation/liberation, but does not enable us to grade them comparatively'. In response to this I could repeat my remarks in Section Three: we are entitled to make the comparison even though we know others might disagree.
- 14 This comparison is made by Nancy Murphy in *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.