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**ON THE DIVERSITY OF RELIGIONS AND THE REFERENCE  
OF RELIGIOUS TERMS**

by

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The topic of the unity and diversity of the world's religions is a rather tangled subject, and one which I think has not yet been very deeply explored. It suffers, so it seems to me, from excessive enthusiasms on both sides of the issue--from the enthusiasm of those, on the one hand, who wish to generate immediately a unity of all mankind, and also from the intensity of those who, stressing the uniqueness of their own tradition and faith, emphasize the diversity and conflict of religions. (I have most often found myself on this latter side.) But perhaps not many of us have had the patience to sort out the many strands of thought and commitment which come together in this issue. In this paper I will try to explore, perhaps too briefly, how the idea of *reference* may bear on this problem.

Why should there be any problem at all about the unity of religions? Why should we not think of them much as we think of different cuisines--as different ways of satisfying a common hunger? Perhaps there are many reasons for rejecting this analogy. One reason which has been prominent in Christian thinking at least, and maybe in some other traditions also, involves the notion of truth. The different religions at least seem to say different things about the

world, about God, about human nature and destiny, and so on. Of course, they are not totally diverse. No doubt some religions agree, or at least appear to agree, on some things. There may even be something about which all religions agree.<sup>1</sup> But on some things they appear to differ.

Even the fact that religions differ in this way would not be a serious barrier to thinking of them as constituting an important unity were it not for the fact that they appear to differ in an especially strong way. That is, they appear to say incompatible things. They say things which could not possibly all be true. It is not so much as even logically possible (or so, at least, it is thought) that all the religions should be correct in all of their claims, or even in all of their central and important claims. And therefore some people, professing a high regard for truth, are inclined to think that religions must differ sharply in value, and that they should be construed as competitors which require of us an "either/or" decision, rather than a "both/and" synthesis.

One might, I suppose, think that this view over-emphasizes the importance of truth, and that we should focus instead on some other value. In this paper I will not consider this suggestion at all. I will instead explore some of the problems involved in the claim that the different religions involve logically incompatible truth claims.

Much religious talk seems to be *about* something. Classical Christian textbooks on theology contain a lot of doctrines about God--

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<sup>1</sup>We should not be overly quick, however, to assume that this must be the most important thing. Why may it not be the case that the religions agree on the trivialities? Agreement itself need not guarantee importance.

attempts to identify and describe some of the divine attributes, descriptions of divine actions in the world (for example, the creation, the incarnation, and so on), claims about God's attitude towards His creation, and things of that sort. But it is not only academic theology which is about God. Christian devotional talk too is filled with references to God--for example, with praising God for His love and mercy. Many hymns seem to be about God. And we could go on.

This notion of an utterance being about something, which I will sometimes call *reference*, is central to the discussion in this paper.

Of course, an utterance is not merely about something. For one thing, an utterance may be about more than one referent. But more importantly, an utterance normally involves doing something beyond identifying a referent. If the utterance is a question, then something is asked about that referent. And if the utterance is a statement or assertion, then something is asserted about that referent. So, for example, the utterance

(1) Ronald Reagan owns a ranch in California

may be about Ronald Reagan. And if so, then it seems to assert that he owns a ranch in California. In a similar way

(2) God created the world

may be about God. And if so, then it asserts that He created the world.

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Now, I have said that these utterances "may be" about Mr. Reagan and about God respectively. That "may," that hesitancy, constitutes the central problem of this paper.

It is sometimes said that God has many names. That sounds to me as though it is very likely to be true. After all, even Mark Twain had two complete names. Why shouldn't God have many names? Maybe He has even more than the 999 which Al-Ghazali is reputed to have identified. Maybe, indeed, He has an infinite number of names.<sup>1</sup> But there is another side to this coin. And that side is constituted by the fact that some names are the names of more than one thing. Might the name (or word) "God" be the name of more than one thing?

There must be hundreds, maybe thousands, of men who have the name "Ronald Reagan." That name belongs to them just as much, just as legitimately, as it does to the president. Utterance (1) above includes that name. Under normal circumstances it would be used to make an assertion about somebody named "Ronald Reagan." But even if it is about somebody with that name it need not be about Ronald Reagan. For there are those hundreds or thousands of other men whom it could be about. No doubt their friends, family, and acquaintances sometimes talk about them rather than about the president. And when they do it will be natural for them to use the name "Ronald Reagan" to refer to their friend or relative, and not to the president. When I use that name in this context, however, (rather than merely reporting some other use or possible use of it)

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<sup>1</sup> But we should not infer from this that every name is a name of God.

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then I use it to refer to the president of the United States. And I suppose that you understand it in the same way (in this context, of course). That is why it is only superficially paradoxical to say that utterance (1) might not be about Ronald Reagan but about someone else of the same name.

If, on the other hand, I use a name to refer to a particular person and you understand it as referring to some other person, then there is a misunderstanding, a failure of communication. And perhaps that is one of the ways in which there may be a failure of understanding between religious traditions.

How does a name come to have the reference which it does have? One influential theory might be called "descriptivist." A name is a surrogate for a description (a "definite description"), and the name, just like the description itself, refers to whatever in fact satisfies the description. So, for example, "the first president of the United States" is a description of the required sort. It is put in such a way that it could be satisfied by at most one thing. And (if our received histories are correct) there actually is, or was, something that satisfies it. There was in fact a first president of the United States. This description, therefore, can be used to refer to that person. And if the name "George Washington" is associated in the right way with that description then that name refers to that same person.

Now, on the most influential view of definite descriptions, and perhaps the most plausible view, if it happens that there is in fact nothing which satisfies the description, or if more than one thing satisfies it, then the description is a failure so far as reference is

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concerned. It does not refer to anything at all. And if it is the crucial referring expression in some utterance, then that utterance turns out not to be about anything at all. This is something worth remembering if we are inclined to use this sort of account to explain the reference of some religious term such as "God."

It seems to me, at any rate, pretty clear that we sometimes do use definite descriptions in this way. And if that is so, then there would seem to be no great difficulty in using some name as a surrogate or abbreviation for some such description. Perhaps that is the way in which some names acquire their referring power. And maybe when people ask for a definition of "God" they want to have something like a description of this sort, so that they will know what that name or word refers to.

It does not seem likely, however, that all (or even most) of the ordinary names in our language could be accounted for in this way. For one thing, it would seem that any actual concrete entity would satisfy many different definite descriptions. George Washington, for example, is no doubt the first president of the United States. But he is also the commander of the continental army in the war of independence, he is the husband of Martha Washington, and so on. But one would seem to be totally at a loss to pick out one of these as the definitive description to be associated with the name "George Washington." Now and then a word is introduced into English (or some other natural language) *with* a definition. But most of our words, and certainly most of our names, do not come with anything like a canonical definition attached. And so it is difficult to think that a name such as Washington's is really a surrogate for a

description. For we seem to have no idea of just what description that would be.

Of course, if someone now asks me to tell him who George Washington is, I might try to identify him as the first president of the United States. (But I might also try to identify him as the commander of the revolutionary army, etc.) It seems clear, however, that Washington had his name, and his name was successfully used to refer to him, long before he became president, and long before he achieved any of the other distinctions by which we would now try to identify him. And this too makes it seem unlikely that his name ought to be construed as a surrogate for any of these descriptions.

Some analogous problems would seem to attend any attempt to explain the reference of "God" in terms of a description. Within the Christian tradition there are plenty of descriptions of God, and some of these, I would suppose, are "definite descriptions." God is the creator of heaven and earth, He is the father of our lord Jesus Christ, He is the one who delivered Israel from the bondage of Egypt, He is the one who inspired the preaching of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and so on. But it is not easy to think of a reason for picking out one of these rather than another as the canonical description to be associated with the word "God."

Probably because of these difficulties in the descriptivist theory of names there has recently come into prominence another theory, sometimes called "causal." According to this view, a human speaker can more or less arbitrarily assign a name to some entity. A commonplace example would be that of parents who simply decide



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on some name for their child. Sometimes the name is assigned with some ceremony--perhaps at the baptism of a baby, or the launching of a ship. Or it may be done with practically no ceremony at all, as in the case of girl who is given a puppy, and who says "I'm going to call him "Troubles." And then the use of that name is transmitted from person to person, perhaps over a long historical period, by a sort of tradition. And, according to this theory, people who use that name within that tradition use it to refer to whatever entity it was originally attached to at the beginning of that particular tradition. So if the girl tells a friend, "I've named my dog 'Troubles,'" then the friend can also use that name to refer to that dog.

How does the name get attached to its referent in the first place? Or perhaps we can ask it this way. Suppose that a priest baptizes several babies, and calls out the names which their parents have chosen. How does he ensure that each baby gets the right name? How does he "aim" the name at the baby? Presumably, there is something here about intentionality. The priest, or the parents, etc., intend for this baby (and not some other) to receive the name "John." And that's why it is that this baby, and not the next one, is the one who was named "John." And what provides the indexicality for the word "this" in the preceding sentences? It is suggested that the original namer has to have some "direct" contact, some experiential contact, with the entity which is to be named. The priest has to be able to say, or to think, "It is this baby--the one I am holding, or pointing to, or looking at--this is the one to whom I intend to give the name 'John.'" The girl has to look at her dog, or

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to have some other direct contact with it, and to intend that it be that dog which is to be called "Troubles."

Now, this theory is uncomfortably vague in some ways. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it is generally on the right track, at least for some (probably most) of our referring expressions. It seems to have the right "feel" about it, when we think of how we actually come to acquire the use of a certain name—for a mountain, say—from people who already use that name, and who may have in their turn received it from still others.<sup>1</sup> And perhaps it is right to say that in adopting and using that name we are adopting and entering into a certain linguistic tradition or line of historical transmission.

Well, after this excursion into the philosophy of language, let us come back to some version of the problem about the logical incompatibility of the different religions. Let us take what is often cited as an example of such an incompatibility. Many Christians—I would suppose that it is the great majority of Christians—hold that God is in some way a trinity. There is some deep "three-ness" about Him. And doctrines to this effect regularly occur in more or less orthodox Christian theological systems. I have no doubt but that this doctrine is rooted in the conviction that in some way the man Jesus of Nazareth is God indeed, and perhaps also in the conviction that God is not only transcendent of the universe but also within us now. But here I don't want to get into any further explanation or defense of this doctrine of the Trinity.

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<sup>1</sup> I remember hearing an archaeologist describing some work in the Gaza area of Palestine, and saying "Now, there is a place which has had the same name for four thousand years!".

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Now, it is often said that here we can find a particularly clear case of the incompatibility of two religions. For Islam, we are told, is committed to the claim that in no way at all is God a trinity. There are not three divine persons, nor three divine anything. There is no three-ness, nor any duality or multiplicity of any sort, about God. So the Christian doctrine and the Islamic doctrine are logically incompatible. It is not logically possible that God be both as the Christians and the Muslims describe Him.

Assuming that the Islamic doctrine is really as I have described it above, then that conclusion seems to me to be correct. And I will assume that my description is correct--with one crucial  *caveat*  I make this assumption because this paper is about that  *caveat*  and not about the other ways in which I might be mistaken about Islam. The  *caveat*  is this: Might we be mistaken in thinking that the Islamic doctrine is a doctrine about God? Might it really be a doctrine about something (or someone) else instead?

Islamic theological (and devotional) statements characteristically, I think, make use of the word "God."<sup>1</sup> But if what I said early on in this paper was correct, then the use of the name "Ronald Reagan" in an utterance by no means guarantees that the utterance is about Ronald Reagan. For it may readily, and without any oddity or impropriety, be about one of the other people who have the very same name. Why should we rule out, from the beginning, the possibility that Islamic theology uses the word "God"--

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<sup>1</sup> More properly, I suppose, we should say that such statements often use an Arabic word which is often rendered in English by "God." But I think that this makes no important difference to the discussion here.

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and perhaps with no impropriety--to refer to an entirely different entity from that to which Christians refer? And, of course, we can think of asking a similar question about the crucial terms of other religions--Brahman, Atman, Nirvana, and so on.

Now, in some ways the causal theory of reference seems very attractive here. For it looks as though Christians learn the use of the word "God" within the Christian tradition, Muslims learn it within another, Hindus learn the important Hindu terms within still a third religious tradition, and so on. But here it is important to recall a crucial feature of that theory. The tradition has to get started in some way. There has to be the initial assignment of the name to some one thing and not to something else. And it is usually thought that, in order for the assignment to work, the namer has to have some experiential contact with the thing which he or she is naming. There has to be that contact in order to put some juice into the "this" of the intention "This is the being which I will call 'God.'"

If this is so, however, then the previous question can be stated in a new way. What reason do we have for thinking that the Islamic tradition began with an experience of the same being as the one involved in the experience which began the Christian tradition? And is it possible that the Hindu tradition began with an experience of still a third being? And so on.

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<sup>1</sup>I ignore here the problem of whether the Christian use of the word "God" refers to God, or (perhaps more perspicuously) whether all Christian uses of this word refer to the same being. But there is a problem there, and it should not be ignored forever.

At this point we may feel some renewed attraction in the descriptivist approach. We may think of settling this question, or at least of getting some reasonable judgment about it, by asking the various theologians to "define their terms." What do they mean by "God"? Or (perhaps better) let them identify for us the being to which they intend their terms to refer. Then we shall be able to see whether they refer to the same or to different things.

I suspect that the Muslims, just like the Christians, will not be entirely comfortable with this demand.<sup>1</sup> And if they repress the discomfort, and produce the required "definition" or definite description, then the consequences which follow would seem to be distressingly accidental. If the Christian says that God is the father of our lord Jesus, and the Muslim says that God is the master of the universe, then their identifications seem not to settle at all the question of whether they refer to the same being. But the Christian might easily have said that God is the master of the universe, and that would seem to have closed the matter--they refer to the same being. If, on the other hand, the Christian had happened to include the doctrine of the trinity in his identification of God, while the Muslim had included his own doctrine of strong "unicity," then the matter would seem to be closed in the opposite direction. But in the absence of a canonical description to be associated with the word "God" this seems entirely unsatisfactory. What experience, if any, began the various traditions, cannot depend on which among the

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<sup>1</sup> I think that there is nothing specifically theological or religious about this discomfort. It belongs in the same bag as our puzzlement over how to define "George Washington."

many descriptions of God available in each tradition happens now to be picked out by one theologian or another.

How this question is settled, however, may have a powerful bearing on the question of whether these religions are incompatible in the way I suggested earlier. I said then that I would assume that, except for the ~~case~~ we have just been discussing, the account I gave of Islamic unicity was correct. If we now rule out the ~~case~~ also, thus ruling in effect that the Islamic doctrine and the Christian doctrine are about the very same being, then it seems clear that these doctrines are incompatible. It is not logically possible that there be one being which satisfies both doctrines.

If, on the other hand, we find ourselves ruling the other way on the ~~case~~, then the situation is quite different. We now say that the Islamic doctrine and the Christian doctrine are about different beings--or at least that they are not about the same being.<sup>1</sup> And in that case it is not at all clear that the doctrines are incompatible. For it is not at all clear that there could not be two beings, one of which was a trinity in the Christian sense and the other of which had the strong unicity which (on my assumption anyway) the Islamic doctrine demands.

If we construe Christianity and Islam--and then Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions--not as making different claims about the same thing (God, for example) but rather as making different claims about different things, then we get, I think, a much more complex picture of their possible relations. Maybe in the end that

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<sup>1</sup>That is, we should perhaps allow for the possibility that one (or both) of these doctrines is about no being at all (because, for some reason, the subject term fails to refer to anything at all).

picture will yield the same inexorable either/or which was often associated with the other picture. But at least we must travel a longer road to arrive at that final branching.

But how are we to decide this question after all? How can we decide whether the Christian and the Muslim refer to the same person (or being) when they use the word "God." I'm not at all sure of an answer to that question. Perhaps the Christian theological tradition itself provides the materials for a solution of the problem. But we can perhaps best explore that possibility in our discussion together.