



God, Love, and Interreligious Dialogue

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Abstract

The monotheistic religions that valorize love typically believe that their love for God should be extended to God's creatures and, in particular, to one's fellow human beings. Yet, in practice, the love of the Christian or Muslim or Hindu monotheist doesn't always extend to the love of the religious other. Precisely how, then, should the adherents of the major monotheistic religions respond to the obvious diversity of these religions? The arguments of philosophical theology largely depend on what John Henry Newman called our "illative sense" or faculty of informal reasoning. Even the most fully developed illative sense can vary from one person to another, however. As a consequence, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu monotheists are unlikely to fully agree on matters of philosophical theology. I argue that this precludes neither mutual respect, though, nor a rational adherence to the philosophical and theological views of one's own tradition.

Original Research



Keywords

Love of God. Neighbor Love. Illative Sense. Dialogue.

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The Monotheistic religions that valorize love typically believe that their love for God should be extended to God's creatures and, in particular, to one's fellow human beings. Yet, in practice, the love of the Christian or Muslim or Hindu monotheist doesn't always extend to the love of the religious other. Precisely how, then should the adherents of the major monotheistic religions respond to the obvious diversity of those religions?

Only two responses are realistically possible¹: exclusivism and inclusivism; both of which break down into two subcategories. Doctrinal exclusivists maintain that the central claims of one's "home religion" are true and the claims of "alien religions" that conflict with them are false.² Salvific exclusivists insist that salvation can only be found in their home religion. Doctrinal exclusivists may be salvific exclusivists as well though many of them are not.

Doctrinal inclusivists are also salvific inclusivists. In their view, neither truth nor salvific efficacy is confined to one's home religion. Inclusivists do typically insist on the doctrinal and salvific superiority of their home religions, however. While doctrinal inclusivists are more inclined to believe that alien religions have much to teach us than are many doctrinal exclusivists their positions aren't radically dissimilar. Both doctrinal exclusivists *and* doctrinal inclusivists agree that if one asserts a claim, he or she is, in consistency, bound to reject its denial as false, and neither is willing to abandon or radically modify the core claims of their home religions. The difference between them is thus at most a difference in degree. In the final analysis then, doctrinal inclusivism is neither more (nor less) than a somewhat more generous or open form of doctrinal exclusivism.

It is also worth noting that apparent irenicism is often only merely apparent. Ibn Arabi, for instance, at one point says that "My heart takes on every form/A pasture for gazelles/A cloister for monks/The idols' temple/ A Ka'ba for the circling pilgrim/the Torah's tables, and the Qur'ans pages/I follow the religion of love: Whichever way the caravan turns, I turn. This love is my religion. This is my Faith" (Safi, 2018, p. 121). It would be a major mistake, however, to

1. See my "Competing Religious Claims" (pp. 220-41, in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religions* 2005, William E. Mann, Ed. Malden MA & Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing] in which I argue that (a) there are real and significant theological differences between the major religions and that (b) the views of "Pluralists" like John Hick and Peter Byrne are not only fraught with internal difficulties but could also be reasonably rejected by an educated, informed, and, and intelligent traditional monotheist. (For Hick's and Byrne's positions see e.g., the former's *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 1989. New Haven and London: Yale University Press; and the latter's *Prolegomenon to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Reason in Religion*, 1995. London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press).

2. A "home religion is the one you belong to if you belong to one at all" and "alien religions...are any you do not belong to" (Griffiths 2001, xiv).

infer that Ibn Arabi didn't think that Islam wasn't the true religion.

But what attitude should a devout Christian, for example, take toward her religious others? The fact that they dismiss them if they do, or don't love them if they don't, doesn't justify them in dismissing or not loving them. On the contrary, if (as Kierkegaard and others have argued) God is love and one truly loves God one must love those whom he loves. Moreover, one's love must be *genuine*. (While some Christian fundamentalists, for example, profess to love their opponents, their behavior sometimes suggests that they neither truly respect nor genuinely love them.)

One of the more interesting and irenic attempts to dissolve the Christian's problem of the religious other is Karl Rahner's. His "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions" states four theses. The first is that Christianity rests on "God's free self-revelation" in Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection, and "understands itself as the absolute religion intended for all men, which can't recognize any religions beside itself as of equal right" (Rahner, 1966, p. 118)

His second and third theses are the most interesting and also the most controversial. The second is this: "Until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual,¹ a non-Christian religion," while containing errors, may also contain "supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift *on account of Christ*" (Rahner 1966, p. 121, my emphasis).

For though it is true both that "there is no salvation apart from Christ" and that God "has seriously intended this salvation for all men," it is also true that it is quite unthinkable that man being what he is could actually achieve a proper relationship to God's offer of grace "in an absolutely private interior reality...outside of the actual religious bodies which offer themselves to him in the environment in which he lives." Rahner's conclusion is that because Christianity isn't a live option for most of the devout of other faiths and since God can only be accessed through the practice of some concrete religion or other, God's grace in Christ is bestowed upon them *through* the devout practice of their religions (Rahner, 1966, pp. 123 & 128).

If this is so (and this is Rahner's third thesis), a Christian should not treat the "member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian...but as an *anonymous* Christian," namely a man or woman who has in effect experienced the grace which God has made available through Christ in the non-Christian

1. Roughly, until Christianity (in William James's words) is a "live option" as it is not for most Muslims and Vaishnavas, for example. A choice is living in James's sense if each alternative "appears as a real possibility to whom it is proposed"---that is, if one has some inclination to believe and thus act on it. (*The Will to Believe and other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 1896, reprint, New York: Dover, 1956, p. 2).

religion to which he or she belongs (Rahner 1966, pp. 131-32, my emphasis).

Finally (thesis four) while the devout Christian may rightfully hope that the “anonymous Christian” will [someday] convert to Christianity itself, she must never forget that “God is greater than man *and the [Christian] Church*” (Rahner, 1966, p. 134, my emphasis).

But by parity of reason couldn't a devout and learned Muslim after the pattern of Ibn Arabi, for example, argue that at least some Christians are “anonymous Muslims”? I see no reason to think that he or she couldn't.

It is unreasonable to expect ultimate agreement among even the most intelligent, learned, and irenic philosophical theologians, however. For many of their best and most interesting arguments are neither deductively valid nor inductively sound. Their conclusions, in other words, are not entailed by their premises. Nor can they be derived from them by inductive extrapolations (by generalizing from the character of a fair sample, for example, or by inferring that an event will occur because similar events have occurred under similar conditions in the past.) They are, instead, inferences to the best explanation. A hypothesis is adopted because it provides a more plausible explanation of a range of disparate facts than its competitors.

John Henry Newman called the faculty of informal reasoning that is deployed in these arguments “the illative sense.” It is principally employed in three ways: (1) in conducting an argument, (2) in assessing prior probabilities, and (3) in evaluating an argument's overall force.

In conducting an argument, for example, one's illative sense must be used to “scrutinize, sort, and combine” the facts, principles, experiences, and the like bearing on the truth or falsity of the proposition under dispute. It decides which considerations are relevant, assigns weights to different kinds of consideration, marshals the evidence in some sort of order, applies appropriate principles (those used in assessing testimony, for example), and balances the positive and negative considerations against each other. Although this can be done well or badly, “it is plain...how little that judgment will be helped on by [formal] logic and how intimately it will be dependent upon the intellectual complexion of the” reasoner (Newman, 1870, p. 284).

Our illative sense is also responsible for judgments of antecedent probability. We legitimately dismiss some hypotheses and opinions without argument. Those we cannot dismiss as irrelevant or absurd are assigned a certain probability. But these assignments “will vary...according to the particular intellect” that makes the assessments (Newman, 1870, p. 233). Moreover, each of us has his or her “own view concerning” the likelihood of the conclusion “prior to the evidence; this view will result from the character of [one's] mind...if [one] is indisposed to believe [one] will explain away very

strong evidence; if [one] is disposed [one] will accept very weak evidence” (Newman, 1843, LSF).

Perhaps, the illative sense’s most important function, however, is to assess an argument’s overall force. These, too, reflect the histories and temperaments of the persons who make them. For when it comes to “the question of what is to become of the evidence, being what it is,” each must decide “according to (what is called) the state of his heart” (Newman, 1843, LSF, p. 227). The ultimate test, in other words, is one’s own best judgment. My judgment, however, is irredeemably personal, for I can only view the various pieces of evidence “in the medium of my primary mental experiences, under the aspects which they spontaneously present to me and with the aid of my best illative sense” (Newman, 1870, p. 281).

People’s illative senses often lead to opposed conclusions, however. Why is this the case? Partly because the “first principles...with which we start in reasoning on any given subject matter” are “very numerous and vary...with the persons who reason...only a few of them [being] received universally” (Newman, 1870, p. 96). The “intuitions, first principles, axioms, dictates of common sense, presumptions, presentiments, prepossessions, or prejudices” with which we approach a body of evidence are reflections of our experiences (Newman, 1976, p. 108). And because the latter vary so too will the former.

Our impression of an argument’s overall force is also affected by “personal” factors. People sometimes withhold assent from an argument through “a vague feeling that a fault” lies at “its ultimate basis” or because of “some misgiving that the subject matter was beyond the reach of the human mind.” Or we may remain unpersuaded because “we throw the full *onus probandi* on the side of the conclusion,” refusing to assent until the arguments are not merely good but conclusive (Newman, 1870, pp.142-44).

Yet doesn’t this reveal the illative sense’s subjectivity and thus give the game away? *Truth* may not be relative (Newman clearly thought it wasn’t) but illative reasoning surely is. And because *all* informal reasoning involves illation, even the most careful informal reasoning appears tainted by subjectivity.

This is clearly not Newman’s intention. He thought, for example, that good cumulative case arguments for faith are “valid proofs.” Although they can’t be “forced on the mind[s]” of just anyone they are capable of convincing anyone who “fairly studies” their premises (Newman, 1976, p. 27, my emphasis). And in general, if one’s argument is good, one will find that “allowing for the difference of minds and modes of speech, what convinces him, does convince others also...There will be very many exceptions but those *will admit of explanation*” (Newman, 1870, p. 300, my emphasis). Some opposed “intuitions.” for example can be discounted because they have been created by “artificial and corrupt” social codes and practices. Others can be dismissed as expressions of raw and

uncultivated human nature (Newman, 1976, pp. 70-79). The important point is that our illative senses can be well or badly employed. If everyone were to use them rightly, many if not most major disagreements would disappear.

Experience and practice are necessary, however. Those who are qualified to judge have had a “long acquaintance with their subject” matter, and so we too must “learn as they have learned,” depending more on “practice and experience than on [formal or explicit] reasoning” (Newman, 1870, p. 269).

Moreover, our illative faculties can be enfeebled and perverted by “prejudice, passion, and self-interest” (Newman, 1870, pp. 239-61). Conscience, for instance, is part of our natural noetic equipment and when healthy, directs our attention to God. For our experience of guilt and moral inadequacy “instinctively” suggests the presence of a “moral governor” and “judge” who will hold us accountable. Our conscience can be warped or blunted, however, and when it is we will fail to recognize the God to whom it points.

Yet how does one know when one is using one’s illative faculties properly? There are at least three indications that one is doing so. The first is “the agreement of many private judgments in one and the same view” (Newman, 1870, pp.248). Newman says, for example, that his argument from conscience would not be “worthwhile my offering it unless what I felt myself agreed with what is felt by hundreds and thousands besides me” (Newman, 1870,p. 318). In matters of religion, ethics, metaphysics, and the like, each of us can [ultimately] speak only for himself...[A person] brings together his reasons and relies on them, because they are his own, and this is his primary” and indeed his “best evidence.” Nevertheless, “if it satisfies him, it is likely to satisfy others” provided that his reasoning is sound and his conclusions true. “And doubtless he does find...that allowing for the difference of minds and modes of speech, what convinces him, does convince others also.” And this agreement is “a second ground of evidence.” (Newman, 1870, pp. 300-31).

(The first is one’s own reasons.) *Universal* agreement should not be expected, however, because people’s illative senses are often undeveloped or misemployed. A failure to secure *substantial* agreement, on the other hand, indicates that one’s illative powers are being used idiosyncratically.

Other signs that one has drawn the right conclusions are “objections overcome...adverse theories neutralized,...difficulties gradually clearing up,” consistence with other things known or believed, and the fact that “when the conclusion is assumed as a hypothesis, it throws light upon a multitude of collateral facts, accounting for them and uniting them together in one whole” (Newman, 1870, pp. 254-256). In other words, a sign that one has reasoned rightly is that one’s argument satisfies the criteria for inferences to the best explanation.

So how do we know that our epistemic faculties are functioning as they

ought? “By determining...what contribute[s] to human flourishing” (Newman, 1870, p. 273). Because a developed conscience is *essential* to human flourishing, for example, a belief in God and an openness to revelation (which are natural effects of conscience) are expressions of properly functioning epistemic capacities. Still, why should we trust them? For several reasons.

One is “necessity.” “Our being with its faculties...is a fact not admitting of question, all things being of necessity referred to it, not it to other things.” Indeed, “there is no medium between using my epistemic faculties as I find them, and flinging myself upon the external world according to the random impulse of the moment” (Newman, 1870, p. 272). Yet while this may be true, how is my trust in my epistemic faculties *justified*?

They are liable to error of course but some liability to error is compatible with a faculty’s general reliability. As Newman says, it is natural (and reasonable) to trust the senses even though we know they sometimes deceive us. “Again we [rightly] rely implicitly on our memory, and that too, in spite of its being obviously unstable and treacherous...The same remarks apply to our assumption of the fidelity of our reasoning powers” (Newman, 1843, FR, pp. 213-214).

It is true that a noetic faculty should be distrusted if the *trained* capacity is prone to error. Wide disagreement among those with *cultivated* illative capacities would be a clear indication of their unreliability, and Newman implicitly agrees. For, as we have seen, he believes that if we have used our illative capacities rightly, we will find that a very large number of those with properly cultivated illative senses will arrive at similar conclusions.

If illative reasoning is unavoidable, I can’t be faulted for engaging in it. But is it epistemically *reliable*? Does it track the *truth*? It is, and does, if it is an “expression of his will.” For God is not a deceiver. How though, do I know that my illative capacities are a gift of providence? By deploying them! Since one of their very functions is to tell me of Him, they throw a reflex light upon themselves” (Newman, 1870, p. 275). By properly employing my illative faculties I learn of God’s providence and thus acquire reason for trusting them.

The force of this isn’t altogether clear, however, since there is an obvious circularity. My justification employs the very capacities whose credentials are in question. Whether this is damning is less clear though. It is true that if I take this line, I won’t be able to convince everyone or provide a non-question-begging defense of my epistemic position. Whether this consequence is disastrous, however, depends on whether it is reasonable to require universal agreement or non-question-begging defenses of basic epistemic practices (that is, practices which underlie all right-thinking but can’t themselves be further justified). The first sets a standard that can’t be met by most serious intellectual endeavors, and the second is equally questionable since basic epistemic practices like memory or sense perception can’t be justified without circularity either.

The upshot is this. A person, A, who has made the best use of the illative faculties she has been endowed with is entitled to believe in the truth of her views on philosophical theology. She should nevertheless recognize that a different person, B, who has used his own illative faculties to the best of *his* ability and arrived at a conclusion that A believes to be false should not be morally faulted by A¹ if he has done the best that he could do with the illative faculties that *he* had been endowed with.

1. I am assuming that some but not all epistemic faults are moral faults. Concluding that nothing is wrong with dishonesty or that a person I dislike is guilty of a crime for which there is very little evidence are examples.

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