

# Is Uncertainty A Sound Foundation For Religious Tolerance?

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## SUMMARY

Founding religious toleration on uncertainty about the truth of one's own religious convictions is multiply flawed. It naively supposes that the sources of religious intolerance are primarily intellectual rather than social. It presupposes gratuitously that all religions are on an epistemic par. It fails to take account of the fact that some religions abet religious tolerance. Finally, the proposal is self-defeating because insofar as it presupposes the objectivity of certain moral principles, it actually supplies a defeater of major religious traditions.

## IS UNCERTAINTY A SOUND FOUNDATION FOR RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

### *Introduction*

There is abroad in the Christian philosophical community a view, rarely articulated and defended, but nonetheless widespread, that the proper foundation for religious tolerance is to be found in one's uncertainty that one's own particular religious worldview is true. The rough idea seems to be that the more uncertain one is about the truth of one's own religious views, the less apt one will be to persecute persons who disagree with those views—after all, for all one knows, those persons may well be correct. Insofar as religious diversity serves to undermine one's confidence that one's religious beliefs are true, it is to be welcomed as abetting religious tolerance.

This rough and ready view is subject to formidable objections. In the first place, the view does not provide a moral foundation for religious tolerance, for why we *ought* to be religiously tolerant. It is at best a theory about human psychology: it predicts that persons who are uncertain about their religious views are less apt to persecute people holding to different views. Even if this empirical prediction were to prove true, however, it fails to answer our deepest need, to be able to say that it is wrong to use violence and coercion in the name of religion. We want to be able to say that people ought not to be intolerant, not merely to predict that they will, in fact, be tolerant under such-and-such circumstances.

In the absence of any moral foundation for religious tolerance, the merely psychological approach is unstable and even dangerous. It fails to reckon with the fact that some religions, such as Christianity or Bahai'ism, have as inherent components of their belief systems an ethic of religious tolerance, of love of one's enemy and passivity in the face of religious persecution. With regard to such religions, it is certainty rather than uncertainty of one's religious view which ought to be cultivated for the sake of

religious tolerance. By undermining the confidence of the adherents of such religions in the truth of their respective views, the psychological approach to religious tolerance actually erodes such persons' moral grounds for being religiously tolerant and so increases the odds of intolerant behavior.

On the other hand, in the case of religions, such as Islam, which endorse violence and persecution in the propagation of the faith, the psychological approach leads to the conclusion that should such persons become certain of their religious beliefs, then any grounds for being religiously tolerant have been removed. Since psychological certainty does not imply true belief, it does not require that persons know their religious beliefs to be true, but only that they confidently believe them to be true. Religious tolerance is thus made to balance precariously on 1.2 billion Muslims' remaining in a state of epistemic equilibrium with respect to their religion. Should they become relatively certain that Islam is true, the constraints of intolerance have to that degree evaporated and the fury of *jihad* may be unleashed upon those nations not yet brought into the *dar al-Islam* (house of submission). Founding religious tolerance upon uncertainty is frighteningly dangerous.

Finally, the psychological approach seems naive with respect to the sources of religious persecution and violence. I suspect that intolerance is born, not so much out of certainty of the truth of one's views, as out of hatred for those who are different. This motive drives cases of intolerance which are not specifically religious, as in tribal clashes between Hutus and Tutsis in Christian Rwanda. When it comes to conflicts which are religiously colored, such as those between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, between Hindus and Muslims in India, or between Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka, the conflict seems not so much intellectual as socio-cultural. [1] Different communities are in friction, and the outsider is resented and despised. In these cases, religion helps to provide some of the social identity of the competing subcultures. It is this social function of religion more than, or at least as much as, certainty of its objective truth which is crucial in cases of conflicting communities of different religions. But if it is hatred of the other that primarily fuels such violence, then the diminution of one's certainty that one's religion is true may not translate into reduced violence: the outsider is still different, not one of us, and therefore to be despised.

Again, the attendant suggestion that religious diversity serves to diminish one's certainty about one's own religious views is surely implausible, if not falsified, in light of the religious experience of mankind. Christianity, for example, was introduced into a broader Hellenistic culture that was overwhelmingly pagan. Whole cities, such as Athens, were dedicated to various gods or goddesses, and nations would go to war on the basis of the manic utterances of the Oracle at Delphi. It is hard for us today to imagine the lonely figure of the apostle Paul arriving at the port of Corinth or standing in the shadow of the great temple to Athena on the acropolis of Athens, boldly proclaiming that God had appointed the man Jesus of Nazareth to judge the world and that the time to repent had at last arrived. Paul risked his life to bring the Gospel of salvation to a pagan culture predominantly hostile or at best indifferent to the message he

preached. A study of his extant letters reveals that Paul had an almost wholly negative opinion of the pagan religions around him. They were not sources of salvation or means of access to God for their adherents (Rom. 1.18-25; Gal. 4.8; Eph. 2.11-12; 4.17-18; I Thess. 1.9; 4.5); on the contrary, they were manifestations of spiritual darkness and even demonic (I Cor. 10.20; Eph. 6.12). Despite seemingly impossible odds and horrible persecution, the Christian churches grew and multiplied until within three centuries Christianity had officially supplanted the religions of Greece and Rome. The religious diversity of the Roman Empire had no apparent effect upon the confidence of early Christians that their religious beliefs were true.

Of course, similar stories could be told about persecuted religious minorities elsewhere, such as European Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and even Falun Gong in China. The suggestion that religious certainty is diminished by increased contact with and familiarity with other religions does not seem remotely true. For all of these reasons, the rough attempt to found religious tolerance upon uncertainty is untenable and even dangerous.

### ***Quinn's Combinatorial View***

Philip Quinn is one of those few thinkers who have attempted to provide a more nuanced version of this approach. [2] For Quinn it is the uncertainty of the truth of one's own religious views, which is (or should be) fostered by religious diversity, combined with the relative certainty of various moral principles, such as that it is wrong to try to coerce belief by violence, that supplies the foundation for religious tolerance. But does his view avoid the problems and pitfalls of the merely psychological approach?

Consider Quinn's point of departure, an argument by Pierre Bayle for religious toleration, stemming, ironically, not from Bayle's sceptical period but from his earlier Reformed period. Bayle is arguing that the Catholic appeal to the words "Compel them to come in" found in Jesus' parable of the great banquet (Lk. 14.16-24) to justify coerced conversions is mistaken. Bayle asserts, "by the purest and most distinct ideas of reason, we know there is a being sovereignly perfect who governs all things, who ought to be adored by mankind, who approves certain actions and rewards them, and who disapproves and punishes others." [3] Bayle claims that it is also evident that our chief worship which we owe to God consists of inner acts of the mind. But since coercive actions taken against the body cannot move the mind to perform those acts of the will constitutive of the essence of religion, compulsion is a mistaken way of establishing a religion.

Quinn esteems Bayle's argument "a mess." [4] In the first place, none of the premises of the known

arguments of natural theology has "an epistemic status as high as the law of noncontradiction or other things that are supposed to be known by the natural light." [5] Similarly, Quinn denies that it can be known by the natural light of reason that it is always wrong to use compulsion to try to produce the acts of the mind essential to religion. Even apart from the knotty problem of special divine commands abrogating what would otherwise be one's moral duty, it will be only egregious acts of religious compulsion that are self-evidently immoral; in other cases—for instance, mandatory religious education in public schools of a nation having an established church, like the Church of England—compulsion will not be evidently immoral. [6] Finally, Quinn indicts Bayle's argument for failing to supply any moral foundation for religious tolerance. The argument at best shows that religious compulsion is ineffectual and therefore futile.

Quinn proposes to remedy these defects by introducing a number of revisions to Bayle's argument. He remedies the want of a moral sanction against intolerance by substituting for Bayle's claim that religious compulsion is ineffectual the claim that it is morally wrong to use compulsion to produce the inner acts that are essential to religion. This crucial revision renders Quinn's theoretical foundation for religious tolerance superior to the merely psychological approach.

Quinn then suggests that we remedy the epistemic defects of Bayle's argument by relaxing the reliance on the natural light:

The best strategy for the defender of toleration is to conduct the argument entirely in epistemic terms and not to make any dubious appeals to the Cartesian natural light. The epistemic credentials of two conflicting claims are to be assessed and then compared. One is a moral principle to the effect that intolerant behavior of a certain kind is wrong; the other is a conflicting religious claim about that intolerant behavior. The applicable epistemic principle is that, whenever two conflicting claims differ in epistemic status, the claim with the lower epistemic status is to be rejected. [7]

One will thus assess instances of religious intolerance on a case by case basis.

This seems a very sensible approach. Bayle could argue that we have good, if not compelling, grounds for thinking that a supreme being such as he describes exists and that we have good grounds as well for thinking that God disapproves of certain cases of religious compulsion and therefore they are wrong. Therefore, we ought to refrain from such intolerant behavior.

But Quinn is not sympathetic to such an approach. One of his concerns is that this more modest Baylean approach might not rule out cases of more subtle religious compulsion, such as mandatory religious instruction in the doctrine of the state church. Quinn therefore welcomes the reduction in the

epistemic status of religious claims justifying intolerance which is wrought by religious diversity. Religious diversity undermines the epistemic status of such claims by lowering the epistemic credentials of the whole religious worldview which undergirds them. Thus, with regard to the Catholic tradition of appealing to Lk. 14.23 to justify religious compulsion, Quinn asserts, "considerations of religious diversity can play a valuable role in defeating the epistemic authority of this tradition. They do so indirectly by diminishing the epistemic rationality of the whole Christian package or worldview of which the tradition is a part." [8] Quinn thus advocates undercutting the specific religious claim justifying intolerance with a breathtakingly wide swath. One would have thought it easier and more effective to expose the faulty exegesis of Jesus' parable represented by this tradition. Instead, Quinn, prefers to call into question the epistemic credentials of an entire worldview.

This procedure will appear to be a clear case of epistemic overkill unless one realizes that Quinn thinks that the comparative epistemic credentials of religious worldviews are already roughly on a par. Quinn frequently adverts to William Alston's envisioned scenario of adherents of two incompatible religions each claiming that his religion is true on the sole basis of the reliability of his religious doxastic practice. The two believers have no other justification for their worldviews than their respective doxastic practices and the internal support that they provide, such as, for example, personal, religious experience. Alston is constrained to show that even in such an epistemic standoff, each person remains rational in continuing to adhere to his own doxastic practice and, hence, to his own religion.

Quinn agrees with this conclusion, though he thinks that it would also be rational for each adherent to revise his religious beliefs in such a way as to construe them as only phenomenally true, that is to say, as beliefs about how things appear rather than how they really are. [9] The main lesson, however, that Quinn takes from the scenario described by Alston is that religious diversity substantially decreases the epistemic justification for engaging in any religious doxastic practice. Quinn also takes it that religious diversity has a negative epistemic impact not only on the beliefs that issue from one's religious doxastic practice but also upon one's total religious belief system supported by that practice.

In cases of less egregious religious intolerance, cases in which the moral principle proscribing religious compulsion has a low epistemic status, the awareness of religious diversity can drive the epistemic status of the religious belief even lower, so that it should be rejected. Quinn writes,

The claim that God has commanded mandatory education in orthodoxy might, it seems, derive a good deal of justification from sources recognized by members of the established church . . . . So if the challenge of religious diversity were not taken into consideration, the claim that God commands mandatory education in orthodoxy might derive enough justification from various sources to put it above the threshold for rational acceptability for members of the established church. But the factoring in of religious diversity may be enough to lower the claim's justification below that threshold, thereby

rendering it rationally unacceptable even for members of the church who are sufficiently aware of such diversity. [10]

By undermining the epistemic credentials of one's particular religious doxastic practice, then, the awareness of religious diversity also undermines the epistemic status of the religious worldview based on that practice and thereby the particular religious belief comprised by that worldview which is thought to justify a case of religious intolerance.

### ***Assessment of Quinn's View***

#### **Are All Religions on an Epistemic Par?**

What can be said by way of assessment of Quinn's proposal? One of the immediate problems with Quinn's roundabout justification of religious tolerance via worldview uncertainty is that, as James Kraft observes, [11] what Alston takes to be a worst case scenario Quinn thinks to be typical. I do not think that adherents of the various world religions do find themselves in the sort of epistemic standoff Alston describes. On the one hand, it is possible that a religious doxastic practice is self-authenticating in the sense that it yields warranted, true beliefs and is an intrinsic defeater of putative defeaters brought against it; on the other hand, there are sources of justification and defeat for important religious claims independent of doxastic practices in the form of argument and evidence. Quinn's justification of religious tolerance depends crucially upon a radical scepticism which places all major religions roughly on an epistemic par.

This is not the place to digress at length into such matters. Nor is it necessary, since Quinn's sceptical contentions have been adequately answered elsewhere, and he offers almost nothing in his most recent work to advance the argument.

Consider, first, the claim, defended by Reformed epistemologists like Alvin Plantinga, that the inner witness of the Holy Spirit to the central truths of the Gospel may so warrant those beliefs that they become intrinsic defeater-defeaters. Quinn had objected to Plantinga's earlier claim that belief in God may be properly basic for an intellectually sophisticated adult on the basis of the defeaters posed by the problem of evil and by projective psychology. Plantinga not only showed convincingly, I think, that there are extrinsic defeaters for these alleged defeaters, but he also argued that the warrant supplied by the *sensus divinitatis* or, better, by the Holy Spirit's witness may so exceed the warrant of these alleged

defeaters that the truths attested by the Spirit intrinsically defeat the defeaters Quinn mentions.

In his most recent reflections on their debate, Quinn backs away from claiming that non-moral evil highly confirms God's non-existence to the weaker claim that such evil merely confirms God's non-existence and so "has some justificatory force" in support of atheism. [12] This claim is so weak that it does not come even remotely near to generating a successful defeater of theism. [13] As for projectionist psychology, although Quinn bristles at Plantinga's easy dismissal of such theories, Plantinga seems entirely correct in saying that *as arguments for God's non-existence* they are textbook examples of the genetic fallacy. Thus, the issue is not, as Quinn supposes, their "success in explaining religious beliefs of some sorts," but rather whether "the success of projective explanations . . . is evidence against the existence of God" [14]—an inference which depends crucially upon a facile appeal to Ockham's Razor. [15] Plantinga later came to believe that projective theories should not be construed as arguments for God's non-existence but rather as arguments that one's cognitive faculties are not functioning properly in forming the belief that God exists. [16] As such, they are, indeed, an important potential defeater of the claim that belief in God is warranted in a basic way. Plantinga argues, however, that such projectionist defeaters already assume the non-existence of God and offer no independent reason for thinking that our cognitive faculties are malfunctioning in forming the belief that God exists. Quinn simply notes Plantinga's response and does not disagree. [17]

To these two alleged defeaters Quinn now adds the awareness of religious diversity. Quinn claims that Plantinga shares the view that religious diversity is a source of potential defeaters for properly basic theistic belief for those who are sufficiently aware of it. [18] Elsewhere he observes that Plantinga acknowledges that awareness of religious diversity can have a negative epistemic impact on religious beliefs by reducing the believer's confidence in the truth of those beliefs. [19] Quinn's claim here is, however, misleading. Plantinga does not think that for a purely rational individual religious diversity serves to undercut or rebut religious beliefs attested by the witness of the Holy Spirit. But a believer might react to religious diversity arationally—for example, it might have an emotional impact upon him—in such a way that his confidence in his own religious beliefs is diminished. Since warrant depends on the strength of belief, his warrant is accordingly reduced. But this loss of confidence is wholly unnecessary; there is nothing about the presence of religious diversity which should lead him rationally to doubt the truth of beliefs warranted by the Spirit's witness. Plantinga's defense of his position is long and involved; Quinn therefore begs off a discussion of it and so leaves it an "open question" whether Plantinga's response is adequate [20]—which is just to say that Quinn has failed to show that an awareness of religious diversity does substantially reduce the epistemic status of religious belief.

Quinn adds that even if these three defeaters are individually insufficient to defeat religious belief, they might form a cumulative case that would successfully defeat it. But if, as Plantinga argues, both the

problem of evil and psychological projective theories actually presuppose atheism, then it is hard to see how they can have cumulative force as defeaters; nor would the addition of religious diversity add any rational force to the case. Moreover, Quinn acknowledges that some basic theistic beliefs are or can be intrinsic defeater-defeaters, [21] and he says nothing against the witness of the Holy Spirit's so warranting beliefs that they become intrinsic defeaters of their putative defeaters, including any cumulative defeater. We must not be misled by Quinn's tendency to restrict such intrinsic defeater-defeaters to beliefs grounded in "burning bush" experiences like Moses'. [22] Given Plantinga's externalism, the Spirit's powerful witness to the central truths of the Gospel may manifest itself experientially as simply a quiet assurance of salvation. Finally, the mere possibility of such a cumulative case is not sufficient for Quinn's purposes. He must show that there actually exists some sort of powerful cumulative case if he is to sustain his assertion that the epistemic status of religious beliefs has in fact been substantially diminished by such defeaters. In short, Quinn has said very little to justify his sweeping claim that no religious doxastic practice is self-authenticating or that all such practices are epistemically equivalent.

When it comes to sources of justification and defeat independent of one's doxastic practice, Quinn has even less to say. With respect to natural theology, he says, "The conclusions of the metaphysical arguments of natural theology conflict with the conclusions of impressive metaphysical arguments in nontheistic religious traditions;" [23] specifically, "nontheistic religions such as Theravada Buddhism and Advaita Hinduism seem to be no less well-supported than theistic religions by . . . philosophical arguments." [24]

Really? Consider first the arguments of natural theology. Are there serious problems with those arguments? With respect to Plantinga's version of *the ontological argument*, Quinn's modal scepticism leads him to doubt that it is rationally permissible to accept its key premiss that maximal greatness is possibly exemplified. [25] But Quinn does not interact with Plantinga's defense of the rational permissibility of that premiss, nor does he take cognizance of more recent *a posteriori* defenses of the truth of that premiss. [26] With respect to *the cosmological argument*, Quinn opines that the key premiss of the Leibnizian version of the argument—that every existing thing has a reason for its existence either in the necessity of its own nature or in the causal efficacy of some other beings—is at best rationally permissible. [27] But, again, he does not seek to justify this opinion, apart from commenting that reasonable people may not accept the premiss, which is just to say the same thing in different words. What we really want to know is if there are better reasons to accept that premiss than to reject it, and that Quinn does not discuss. I should say that the reasons in its favor outweigh those (if any) against. [28] Quinn says nothing about other versions of the cosmological argument. [29] When it comes to *the teleological argument*, Quinn's remarks are restricted to expressing scepticism about the heavy use Richard Swinburne makes of the criterion of simplicity in his inductive argument for God's

existence and about his probability estimates concerning evil; [30] but these are idiosyncratic to Swinburne and fail to reflect on the cogency of design arguments in general. [31] With respect to *axiological arguments*, I should say that Quinn's own work on divine command meta-ethics has been very helpful in formulating powerful moral arguments for God's existence. [32] These are only a few of the arguments of natural theology; Alvin Plantinga has articulated more than two dozen which he regards as cogent. [33] Moreover, Quinn agrees that in a cumulative case argument the final force of the case may exceed mere rational permissibility even though the conclusions of its constituent parts do not. Quinn gives no reason to think that this does not happen in the case of theism.

So are the arguments of natural theology counterbalanced by a comparable case for non-theistic religions? What are these metaphysically impressive arguments alluded to by Quinn for Theravada Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta Hinduism? Quinn does not say. Since Theravada Buddhism simply leaves God out of account, being agnostic in this regard, it is not at all clear what positive arguments Quinn can have in mind. In fact, conjoining theism to Theravada Buddhism would actually fill an explanatory gap in the latter, since nothing exists in the system to apportion one's karmic desserts to behavior in successive cycles of rebirth. And as for Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, does Quinn think that there really are impressive metaphysical arguments supporting Sankara's absolute monism and consequent phenomenal illusionism? Even his fellow Vedantists Ramanuja and Madhva did not think so. In fact, Sankara's system is principally an explication of his interpretation of the *Upanishads*, not the conclusion of powerful metaphysical arguments, nor could it be, given his belief in the unreliability of human reason. There certainly are rich philosophical traditions in Hindu and Buddhist religion, but that is not to say that there are impressive philosophical arguments for the truth of these non-theistic religions, much less arguments equal in force to those that can be marshaled on behalf of theism.

Moreover, what about defeaters of these competing worldviews? We have already seen that Quinn failed to advance the argument in his debate with Plantinga over the extent to which the problem of evil and projective psychological theories defeat theism, and he declined to engage Plantinga's epistemological model with respect to religious diversity. Only the first of the trio is, in any case, a potential defeater of theism *per se*, and here there are extrinsic defeater-defeaters available to the theist. So Quinn has not shown that theism supported by natural theology faces significant defeaters.

So what about defeaters confronting non-theistic religions, specifically those Quinn names? Quinn's silence on this matter constitutes a significant lacuna in his appraisal of the comparative epistemic credentials of theistic versus non-theistic religions. Interestingly, the non-theistic religions mentioned by Quinn confront some of the same defeaters as theism, such as the problem of evil and the problem of religious diversity, and their responses thereto need to be assessed. With respect to the problem of evil, for example, Theravada Buddhism attempts to explain non-moral evil by means of reincarnation and accumulated karma, which simply pushes the problem back a notch rather than solves it. [34] Advaita

Vedanta Hinduism is reduced to regarding the distinction between good and evil as merely illusory. True, these religions do not face the projective psychological defeater, but ironically that very fact tends to undercut such projective theories as defeaters of theism, since these religions constitute striking counter-examples to the claim that belief in God is a neurotic father-figure projection endemic to mankind. Quinn needs to show that these religions' responses to the defeaters he lodges against theism are as plausible as the responses offered by theism.

Furthermore, these religions face additional serious and, in my mind, sometimes decisive defeaters. Theravada Buddhism's most interesting metaphysical doctrine is its denial of an enduring, substantial self. But this doctrine is incompatible with its doctrine of karma, that what one suffers in this life is recompense for one's behavior in previous incarnations. It makes no sense to regulate one's life in accordance with Buddhist ethical principles so as to avoid future suffering, since there is no persisting person and so no diachronic personal identity. Advaita Vedanta Hinduism faces utterly crushing defeaters, since its monism and illusionism fly in the face of all our experience of the internal and external worlds and are, moreover, self-defeating, since they undermine their own epistemic credentials, since everything we "know" belongs to the realm of illusion. Advaita Vedanta Hinduism thus has vastly lower epistemic status than even Theravada Buddhism, not to speak of theism. Because Quinn does not even consider the various defeaters confronting these religions, he has not justified his claim that all religions are on an epistemic par.

In addition to natural theology, Quinn recognizes, "Christianity also purports to derive support from other sources such as . . . divine action in history." [35] But, he says, "Christian claims about divine action in history compete with the claims of other religions about which historical events have decisive religious significance." [36] Exactly; and for that reason an examination of the historicity of those events and the credibility of the documents attesting to them can help to determine which religion has the better claim to truth. Consider in this regard the contrast between Islam and Christianity with regard to Jesus of Nazareth. Over the last two centuries the documents of the New Testament have been subjected to an unparalleled examination on the part of critical, historical scholarship, and as a result of such scrutiny the consensus today is that the gospels belong to the genre of ancient biography and are largely reliable sources for the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. By contrast, despite its many passages concerning Jesus, no historian turns to the Qur'an as a source of historical information for Jesus. The reason is easy to understand: in marked contrast to the documents of the New Testament, which were written within the first generation after the events they record, the Qur'an was written six hundred years after Jesus' death by a person (or persons) having no independent source of information for Jesus. In fact, the Qur'an incorporates later legendary stories about Jesus that first appear in the apocryphal gospels, such as the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Significantly, the Qur'an rejects facts concerning Jesus' fate which are accepted by most New Testament historians such as (i) Jesus' burial in a tomb by

Joseph of Arimathea, (ii) his tomb's being found empty by several of his female followers, (iii) his disciples' having multiple experiences of appearances of Jesus alive after his death, and (iv) his disciples' suddenly and sincerely coming to believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead. The reason for the Qur'an's rejection of these facts has nothing to do with the reasons proffered by contemporary, sceptical scholars for denying these events. Rather the Qur'an rejects them for the remarkable reason that it denies that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified (IV. 157). This denial is a thorn in the eye of historical scholarship, since the crucifixion is, in the words of Robert Funk, "the one indisputable fact" we have about Jesus. [37] In light of these facts, the historian cannot take seriously the Qur'anic testimony to the life of Jesus.

The question that remains is whether Islam can be freed from its commitment to the infallibility of the Qur'an so as not to be defeated by these historical errors.. Given the dictation theory of inspiration behind the Qur'an and its virtual divinization as the eternal, pre-existent Word of God (strikingly analogous to the divine Word of John 1.1), one wonders whether Islam could survive such a mutilation any more than Christianity could survive the loss of the historical resurrection of Jesus. In any case, anyone who wants to maintain that the New Testament and the Qur'an have comparable historical credentials has his work cut out for him. It is plainly false that all religions make comparably credible claims about divine actions in history.

The point of this cursory review of sources of justification independent of religious doxastic practice is simply to remind us that Quinn has not shown that, even if competing doxastic practices were on an epistemic par, none of the world's religions enjoys higher epistemic credentials than any of its rivals. Add to this the fact that Quinn has, moreover, not even shown that all major religious doxastic practices are epistemically equal, and it becomes clear that Quinn's formula for religious tolerance is based upon an important and yet to be justified assumption.

### **Do All Religions Have a Lower Epistemic Status than Moral Principles?**

But let us suppose that we can succeed in reducing representatives of the various world religions to a state of epistemic parity concerning their respective faiths. Why should they be religiously tolerant of one another? Quinn's view requires not merely that the religions be on an epistemic par but that they be on an epistemic level lower than the moral principles with which some of them may come into conflict. When one reflects on some of the situations of religious intolerance that Quinn envisions—such as the Amish's excluding from their community people who do not adopt their lifestyle—, the epistemic credentials of the various world religions must be diminished to a very low level, indeed. Let us

suppose, then, that this task can be accomplished. Quinn assumes that the epistemic status of the relevant moral principles is sufficiently independent of one's religious beliefs that they do not suffer an attendant and proportional diminution. Here Quinn's strategy backs into the same paradox as the rough and ready view: by undermining the epistemic credentials of religions which enjoin religious tolerance, Quinn actually lowers the epistemic status of the moral principles for adherents of those religions. A person who, like Quinn himself, finds it difficult to make sense of moral obligation and prohibition apart from divine will or commands will find himself led to doubt the moral principles he apprehends insofar as the epistemic status of his belief in God is diminished. If the epistemic status of his belief in the necessity of God as a basis for moral duty becomes greater than his belief in the objectivity of moral duties due to the diminution suffered by the latter as a result of the reduction in the epistemic credentials of theism, then such a person will no longer have any reason to be tolerant. Quinn's strategy could have the perverse result of turning Christians into Nietzscheans.

In fact, Quinn's strategy may backfire for any religious believer who has a strong belief in divine command morality, regardless of whether his religion enjoins tolerance or not. For example, if a Muslim, as a result of Islam's diminution in epistemic status, comes to be uncertain that theism is true, as he must if Islam is to be on a par with the non-theistic religions, then it is likely that any moral principles he entertains will likewise suffer diminution, in which case he may become an amoralist. Thus his last state may be worse than his first.

Let us grant, however, that we do have a grasp of moral requirements and prohibitions that is largely independent of our grasp of religious beliefs. Let us suppose that we do discern that religiously intolerant acts of various sorts are evil and that we have a moral duty to refrain from them. What Quinn does not seem to appreciate is that in so concluding one has, in effect, produced a defeater for many of the world's religions. Take Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, for example. It lies at the heart of this religion that all reality is ultimately one, that the realm of distinctions, including moral distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong, is illusory. It follows, therefore, that my perceived duty to be tolerant is illusory; I really have no such duty, since there is no distinction between right and wrong. At best, then, Vedantists may argue about which moral illusions we have. We have, for example, the illusion that we ought not to persecute our Buddhist neighbors, rather than the illusion that we should. We can describe more or less accurately our moral illusions, but we have no moral duty to act in accord with those illusions (though we may have the illusion that we do). Insofar as the moral principles supporting religious tolerance have a higher epistemic status than Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, then, a Hindu's grasping such principles constitutes for him a defeater of his religious system of belief. And the same goes for all religions committed to metaphysical monism, such as Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism. With respect to such religions, Quinn's theory of religious toleration is incoherent, for acceptance of his claim of the epistemic superiority of various moral principles on the part of any adherent of such a

religion precludes his believing those very religions.

Moreover, Quinn's strategy for defending religious toleration, while not incoherent with respect to every non-theistic religion, will be incoherent with respect to any such religion which denies the objective reality of moral duties, whether it be monistic or not. Marxism, doubtless the worst source of religious persecution in the twentieth century, is arguably a non-monistic religion which falls into this category. Quinn's attempt to found religious tolerance upon the twin pillars of religious uncertainty and moral conviction is therefore unstable and, for some major religions, incoherent.

### **Bayle's Argument Re-considered**

This conclusion ought to lead us to reconsider Bayle's defense of religious tolerance. Bayle rightly saw, I think, that the moral duty of religious tolerance depends upon which God is real. Non-theistic religions arguably lack any basis for objective moral duties and thus for an obligation to be tolerant. Islam, though theistic, has a morally defective concept of God, whose goodness is trumped by His power, and whose love for people is arbitrary, partial, and conditional. As Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger) recently boldly affirmed, it is no accident that Islam endorses violence in the propagation of religion; such an injunction flows from its concept of God. [38] It is therefore vital, as the Pope explained, that we raise the question as to which is the true God.

This conclusion may seem discouraging for two reasons. First, it seems to imply that persons outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition have no reason to be tolerant. Now in one sense, that is not the case. For since Christianity is true and God has commanded us to love even our enemies and to pray for our persecutors, every person, whether he recognizes it or not, has a duty to be tolerant. In another sense, however, it is the case that non-Christians will not generally find in their religions adequate grounds for an objective moral duty of religious tolerance. In that sense they have no reason to be tolerant. That is why the recent U. S. government intelligence report "National Strategy for Combating Terrorism" concluded that in view of their religious beliefs Muslim suicide bombers are "rational actors," however irrational their actions may appear to us. [39] This is admittedly a terrifying conclusion. But Quinn's proposal also proved incapable of founding a universal injunction to religious tolerance. So how should we respond to persons in non-Christian religions who practice religious intolerance consistently with their worldview? It seems to me that on the one hand on a societal level we have no choice but to oppose them with the rule of law so as to check their intolerant behavior, and that on the other hand on a personal level those of us who are Christians should share with such persons the Gospel of Christ and try to persuade them to become Christians, with the result that they will recognize a sound

foundation for religious tolerance.

That leads me to the second discouragement. It seems a daunting task to provide convincing grounds for persons in all other religions to become Christians. Quinn thought his own approach superior because "It does not impose on defenders of tolerance the apparently impossible task of showing that the whole belief system of any world religion falls short of rational acceptability according to standards to which the adherents of that religion are committed." [40] However that may be, Quinn's proposal does impose on defenders of tolerance the task of showing that Alston's imagined worst case scenario in fact obtains and that religious views justifying intolerance have lower epistemic status than competing moral principles. That will involve leveling all the doxastic practices of the religions of the world and all of the arguments and evidence adduced for each along with all the defeaters faced by each, so as to leave us all in a state not merely of religious epistemic parity but also in a state of parity below our epistemic state with respect to the moral principles of religious tolerance. Such a task, even if it were coherent, would be at least equally as arduous and daunting as the task which I envision. The task of providing an adequate Christian apologetic vis à vis the world religions is best seen as a shared one distributed among the members of the body of Christ.

The foundations of religious tolerance, then, are not to be found in our uncertainty about religious truth; quite to the contrary. The foundation of religious tolerance is to be found in the intrinsic value of every human being created in the image of God and therefore endowed with certain inalienable rights, such as freedom of worship and expression. [41]

Footnotes:

[\[1\]](#)

This impression was borne out by a recent conversation with an international missions representative in India. He told me of Hindu converts to Christianity who have chosen to call themselves "Hindu" and remain within Hindu culture, despite their new Christian beliefs, about which they are quite open. They were investigated by the RSS, the enforcement wing of the radical Hindu nationalist party, responsible for so much terrible persecution of Christians in India. The RSS decided in the end that they did not care what these people believed; what was crucial is that they retained their Hindu identity, and that was sufficient!

[\[2\]](#)

See, *for example*, Philip L. Quinn, "Toward Thinner Theologies: Hick and Alston on Religious

Diversity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38 (1995): 145-64; idem, "Religious Diversity and Religious Toleration," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 50 (2001): 57-80; idem, "Epistemology in Philosophy of Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook on Epistemology*, ed. Paul Moser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 513-38; idem, "On Religious Diversity and Tolerance," *Daedalus* (Winter 2005), pp. 136-9.

[\[3\]](#)

Pierre Bayle, *Philosophical Commentary*, trans. A.G. Tannenbaum (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), p. 35, cited in Quinn, "Religious Diversity and Religious Toleration," p. 67.

[\[4\]](#)

Quinn, "Religious Diversity and Religious Toleration," p. 68.

[\[5\]](#)

Ibid.

[\[6\]](#)

Quinn, "On Religious Diversity," p. 138.

[\[7\]](#)

Quinn, "Religious Diversity and Religious Toleration," p. 70.

[\[8\]](#)

Ibid., p. 71.

[\[9\]](#)

Quinn, "Toward Thinner Theologies," p. 241; idem, "Religious Diversity and Religious Toleration," p. 63.

[\[10\]](#)

Quinn, "On Religious Diversity," p. 139.

[\[11\]](#)

James Kraft, "Philip Quinn's Contribution to the Epistemic Challenge of Religious Diversity," preprint.

[\[12\]](#)

Quinn, "Epistemology," p. 532. Cf. his earlier "The Foundations of Theism Again: A Rejoinder to Plantinga," in *Rational Faith*, ed. Linda Zagzebski, Library of Religious Philosophy 10 (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pp. 40-1, where he asserts that even if God's non-existence cannot be shown to be improbable with respect to non-moral evil in the world, still such evil highly confirms God's non-existence, a claim which is strikingly weak.

[\[13\]](#)

I vividly recall a conversation with Keith Yandell in a Madison café in which he complained that the claim that "Leah the seven-foot Queen of the leprechauns goes about leaving paper cups on tables" is confirmed by the paper cups before us on the table.

[\[14\]](#)

Quinn, "Epistemology," p. 533.

[\[15\]](#)

Not mentioned in his most recent work, Ockham's Razor plays the key role in Quinn's earlier "Foundations of Theism Again," p. 42. Quinn says that if projective theories are successful, then God should be regarded as non-existent because He is explanatorily idle. But as Plantinga has often emphasized, for the theist who takes belief in God as properly basic, God is not posited as an explanatory hypothesis.

[\[16\]](#)

Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 152, 194.

[\[17\]](#)

Quinn, "Epistemology," p. 537.

[\[18\]](#)

Ibid., p. 534.

[\[19\]](#)

Quinn, "Religious Diversity and Religious Toleration," pp. 64-5.

[\[20\]](#)

Ibid., p. 65. Quinn does sometimes suggest that such an appeal to internal sources of justification is question-begging (Quinn, "On Religious Diversity," p. 137; cf. Quinn, "Religious Diversity and Religious Toleration," p. 62); but this is just to repeat what Plantinga has styled the "Son of Great Pumpkin" objection and convincingly answered in *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 342-53.

[\[21\]](#)

Quinn, "Foundations of Theism Again," pp. 38-9.

[\[22\]](#)

Quinn, "Epistemology," p. 535; cf. Quinn, "Foundations of Theism Again," p. 40. The burning bush illustration was drawn from a satirical crack by Plantinga, which Quinn took to represent the typical grounding experience behind intrinsic defeaters.

[\[23\]](#)

Quinn, "Religious Diversity and Religious Toleration," p. 64.

[\[24\]](#)

Quinn, "Epistemology," p. 534.

[\[25\]](#)

Ibid., p. 519.

[\[26\]](#)

See, for example, William Lane Craig, "Natural Theology: Introduction," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, ed. Wm. L. Craig (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 79.

[\[27\]](#)

Quinn, "Epistemology," p. 520.

[\[28\]](#)

See Alexander Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); also *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2d ed., ed. D. M. Borchert, s.v. "The Cosmological

Argument," by Wm. L. Craig (New York: Thompson-Gale, 2006).

[\[29\]](#)

See William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1979); William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); William Lane Craig and Paul Copan, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Bookhouse, 2004). But see Philip L. Quinn, critical notice of William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56 (1996): 733-6.

[\[30\]](#)

Quinn, "Epistemology," p. 523.

[\[31\]](#)

For versions of the design argument, see William Dembski, *The Design Revolution* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2004); Robin Collins, *The Well-Tempered Universe* (forthcoming).

[\[32\]](#)

See Philip L. Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978); for application see discussion of an axiological argument in *Does God Exist?*, ed. Stan W. Wallace (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003).

[\[33\]](#)

Alvin Plantinga, "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments," 33rd Annual Philosophy Conference, Wheaton College, Illinois, October 23-25, 1986, . For Plantinga's reaffirmation of the worth of those arguments, see Alvin Plantinga, "Historical Arguments and Dwindling Probabilities," *Philosophia Christi* 8 (2006): 20.

[\[34\]](#)

One recalls Leibniz's illustration of geometry books' being copied from eternity past's failing to explain why there are such books at all.

[\[35\]](#)

Quinn, "Religious Diversity and Religious Toleration," p. 64.

[\[36\]](#)

Ibid.

[\[37\]](#)

Robert Funk, Jesus Seminar videotape.

[\[38\]](#)

For the full text of the Pope's speech, see [catholicculture.org/news/features/index.cfm?recnum=46474](http://catholicculture.org/news/features/index.cfm?recnum=46474). *N.B.* especially his crucial point: "As far as understanding of God and thus the concrete practice of religion is concerned, we find ourselves faced with a dilemma which nowadays challenges us directly. Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always and intrinsically true?"

[\[39\]](#)

As reported by World Net Daily, "Suicide Bombers Follow Quran, Concludes Pentagon Briefing," September 26, 2006, 10:17 p.m. Eastern.

[\[40\]](#)

Quinn, "On Religious Diversity," p. 139.

[\[41\]](#)

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