16 How to think globally and affiliate locally

Jeanine Diller

Can one theologize without walls and simultaneously affiliate with a particular religious tradition? Or, as Jerry L. Martin phrased the question in conversation: Can a transreligious theologian take account of spiritual truths outside their confession, or would they have to give up or loosen their affiliation to do this?

I will argue that it is *not* a contradiction in terms to affiliate and do Theology Without Walls (TWW), both in a serious way. It is possible to do both. Why? In short, it makes sense to affiliate and do TWW because through TWW, affiliators are expanding their knowledge of the thing that their affiliation has put them in touch with (which I will call “the Ultimate”). That is, despite appearances, they are not *undoing* what they have found from affiliation by thinking outside it; they are rather *adding* knowledge to it.

This “expanding knowledge” sentiment is all well and good, you might be thinking, until an affliator tries it and finds their search for more exploding into confusing and contradictory news about the Ultimate that challenges their affiliation’s view of It. True. The burden of this chapter will be to state more carefully this and two other specific challenges that TWW seems to present for affiliation and then to identify views on religious diversity that address them.

Preliminaries: TWW, affiliation, and belief

TWW seeks the truth of ultimate matters by drawing on the resources of multiple traditions. Because it is about seeking truth, TWW focuses on the propositions associated with religions. To think there is a tension between TWW and affiliation thus seems to assume that affiliation is also, at least in part, about propositions (i.e., that affiliation entails belief). Though I will be assuming for the bulk of the chapter that affiliation does entail belief, I want to explain why this is not obvious as we begin.

By “affiliating with” a religion, I will mean here either belonging to it or identifying with it. *Belonging* to a religion is generally a joint act of the person who is presented to belong and leaders within the religion granting belonging to them under certain conditions. For example, an individual goes

through jukai to enter a Buddhist community, baptism to enter a Christian one, etc. These processes may be more or less elaborate, depending on the religion or community, but for most religions¹ they require a leader. This fact makes belonging to most religions an invite-only affair, though most religions are very free with the invitations. In contrast, *identifying* with a religion is decided by the individual himself or herself. All identity entails is that one considers oneself involved with the tradition enough to call oneself a “Daoist,” a “Muslim,” etc. Though this analogy borders on the sacrilegious, identifying oneself with a religion is as easy as becoming a fan of a sports team. Nobody except me decides that I am a University of Michigan football fan, and I can choose to live out my fanhood with as much or as little devotion as I please.

The wide welcome for belonging and even wider welcome for identifying makes affiliation relatively easy. The complex nature of religion makes it even easier because one can affiliate by participating in only some of a religion’s many dimensions, e.g., creed, code, community, and cult, to use Scott Appleby’s gloss. The relevant question here is: Can one affiliate while dropping creed in particular? Sometimes no; sometimes yes. I know first-hand of several Christian communities where a fair number of beliefs are required for belonging, and of a Jewish community whose rabbi stated was about “deed, not creed.” Still, to guard against setting up a straw man here, I will follow Samuel Ruhmkorff in taking religions “to involve a core area of doctrine even cluster concepts cannot bypass”² and focus on communities that take belief to be necessary for affiliation. Even there, I will argue, one can *still* affiliate and do TWW.

Three challenges to affiliating and doing TWW

But how exactly can one affiliate and do TWW? Doesn’t seeking truth outside one’s tradition *challenge* the beliefs one affirms inside it?

It does, in at least three ways:

Challenge 1: Why seek truth outside one’s affiliation in the first place?

Challenge 2: If I do seek truth outside my affiliation, some outside beliefs seem to contradict some of my home beliefs. That risks a denial of the home beliefs, thereby wearing away at affiliation.

Challenge 3: Even for new beliefs that are consistent with home beliefs, adding new beliefs shifts one’s focus away from home beliefs. That shift weakens one’s affiliation.

Both Challenges 2 and 3 arise from how beliefs within and outside one’s tradition might relate to each other. There are three possible relations, pictured in Figure 16.1:

- 1 The outside beliefs might *confirm* a home belief: for home beliefs *a* and *b*, one can rediscover *b* outside.

Figure 16.1 Home and outside beliefs

- 2 The outside beliefs might *contradict* a home belief: for home beliefs *a* and *b*, one finds *not a* outside.
- 3 The outside beliefs might *add* to the home beliefs: for home beliefs *a* and *b*, one finds *c* outside.

Confirmation of a home belief from the outside as in 1) is all good: it suggests anew that what one thought *was* true *is* true, at least according to the outside tradition too. If anything, such confirmation deepens one's affiliation. For example, imagine I had always believed that the Ultimate was good and then found that same belief in another religion. That makes me even more sure that I was right about the Ultimate's goodness all along.

However, if an outside belief contradicts a home belief as in 2), which belief should one take to be true? If one chooses the outside belief and loses the home belief, this is a hit to one's affiliation – a “loosening” of it, as Martin says. Say I am a Christian who believes in the Trinity and become concerned by a Muslim view that it constitutes polytheism and should be dropped. I become less Christian, it seems, if I drop it. Contradiction and its attendant risk of possible loss of belief is Challenge 2.

Finally, even an outside belief that does not require subtracting but merely adds to the home beliefs as in 3) still distracts from the home beliefs. This loss of focus on, perhaps even loss of love for, the beliefs of one's affiliation is Challenge 3. I had thought for some time that contradiction was the hardest challenge TWW presented for affiliation but, oddly, dwelling on outside beliefs turns out to be an even deeper threat in the end, as we shall see.

Challenge 1 and some preliminary reasons to step outside one's affiliation

One affiliates presumably because, among other things, one is convinced of the truth of the core doctrines of one's religion. So why go elsewhere looking for truth? This is a very fundamental question, and I think many affiliators

never get past it. I think of one colleague who said: Why not look to another religion for truth? Because I might go to hell, that's why!

My main reply to this challenge, and my main point of this whole piece as intimated at the start, can be summed up with what Bilbo writes to Frodo at the start of the movie version of *The Hobbit*: "You asked me once if I had told you everything there was to know about my adventures. And while I can honestly say I have told you the truth, I may not have told you all of it."

Long-standing affiliators with a religion are like Frodo and the Ultimate is like Bilbo in this quote. Their affiliation has brought them in touch with something they perceive as Ultimate. Due to the renowned magnetic attraction of the Ultimate – a "to-be-pursuedness" about it, as J. L. Mackie has said about the good – affiliators may have a keen desire to know everything there is to know about the Ultimate. As they live out their affiliation, they come to know truths about the Ultimate. But in this very process, they also may glimpse how vast the Ultimate is, how it transcends human thought. So they may come to think that, though they have heard the truth from their religion, they may not have heard all of it. So, ironically, it is touching the Ultimate through affiliation that can ready someone to go outside it.

In fact, it is not only natural but also logically required to look beyond one's own experiences of the Ultimate in order to generalize about It, on pain of committing the fallacy of hasty generalization. As Toulmin, Rieke, and Janik (1984) say well:

We commit fallacies of hasty generalization when we (1) *Draw a conclusion from too few specific instances*, for example, basing the general statement "All Audis are lemons" on a few individual reports from friends who have happened to have trouble with their own Audis, or alternatively when we: (2) *Draw a conclusion from untypical examples*, for example, concluding that we do not care for Woody Allen movies (which are normally comedies) on the basis of our reaction to *The Front* (one of [his] rare serious films). . . . Though the relevance of the data to the claim being made is beyond question, there simply isn't enough data available for making the sweeping claim that is alleged to follow from it.

(151–153, emphases theirs)

It is fallacious to generalize from one's own experience to the way the whole world is. So also it is fallacious to generalize from our own personal experience of the Ultimate to claims about the way It actually is. The move from, for example, "I experience the Ultimate as kind" to "the Ultimate is kind" commits the fallacy. To avoid the fallacy, we need to look further for 1) more examples that will help us 2) determine whether our experiences are atypical, as Toulmin says. The more examples we find, the surer we can be about the Ultimate in general.

Challenge 2: meeting contradiction

Still, it is genuinely puzzling why, if we are all meeting the Ultimate, we have such different things to say about it. It is easy to understand how I might hear from another religion about a belief that is *different but adds*, as belief *c* in Figure 16.1 illustrates. If I know someone and you do too, it is not unusual that you know things about them that I don't, so I can learn new things about them from you. But the beliefs that are *different and contradict* as belief *a* and *not a* are in Figure 16.1 – especially numerous such beliefs that contradict – are confusing. If I hear from you that this person is not like I thought and then from several others as well, I start to wonder: Am I wrong? Are you wrong? Are we all wrong? Should we just call the whole thing off?

These questions are the stuff of Challenge 2, and I have asked them over and over again as I, affiliated with one religion, listen to people from other religions talk about the Ultimate. Interestingly, it turns out, there are many ways theorists are meeting Challenge 2.

The landscape of views of religious diversity

The many ways to understand contradictions between the world's religions are “theologies of religious pluralism” – or what I call “views of religious diversity.”³ It will help to talk about these views in the more subtle ways that Perry Schmidt Leukel's view of them allows. He reads views of religious diversity as answers to the question: How many religions “[mediate] salvific knowledge of ultimate/transcendent reality?”⁴ Because this is a “how-many” question, the answers define the usual range with numbers: exclusivists answer “1”; inclusivists answer “1 but others work or help in some way”; pluralists answer “more than 1” (*n.b.* pluralists need not say “all”; as Ruhmkorff (2013) says wonderfully, they are allowed to think “there are some sketchy religions out there”). To complete the logical range, let's add the answer “0” for those who think that no religions mediate salvific knowledge of the Ultimate – either because no religion is good at that yet or because no religion ever can be, say if such knowledge is beyond us or if there is no Ultimate to know in the first place.

The range of views on religious diversity is often displayed with mountains. In Schmidt-Leukel's phrasing, the top of the mountain is “mediating salvific knowledge of the Ultimate” and the arrows represent various religions' ability to do that (see Figure 16.2). On the exclusivist mountain, only one religion makes it to the top while all the others have false starts. On the inclusivist mountain, though only one religion makes it all the way to the top, others might help in the foothills, for example, the Dalai Lama's view that even if it turns out that only Buddhism has saving truths, other religions have partial truths useful for working toward salvation. On the pluralist's mountain, multiple religions make it to the top, and on the error theorist's, none of them do.

Figure 16.2 Soteriological diversity in Schmidt-Leukel

Ruhmkorff noticed that we can convert Schmidt-Leukel's question into a form of a "how-many religions x " question and thereby produce different diversity questions with different fillings for x . So one can ask Schmidt-Leukel's instance of the form (put more simply): "how many religions *lead to salvation?*" (a soteriological question); or other instances, such as "how many religions *have true claims about the Ultimate?*" (an alethic question); "how many religions *provide experience of the Ultimate?*" (an experiential question); etc.⁵

The key point is that someone might not answer each of these questions with the same number. For example, think of Kierkegaard's lovely saying that it is better to pray to a false God truly than a true God falsely. Kierkegaard might hold an *alethic* exclusivism, that the fundamental claims of only *one* religion can be true (there is a true God and there are false Gods) mixed with an *experiential* pluralism, that nevertheless faithful adherents of *many* religions actually experience the divine (God honors their true spirit of prayer). If so, it would be misleading to call Kierkegaard "an exclusivist" or "a pluralist," full stop, because which word applies depends on the diversity question at issue. So people do not hold a single, all-purpose view of religious diversity. They hold views on religious diversity. To picture someone's view, you would be obliged to draw the whole range multiple times, once for each question with the *telos* it discusses at the summit.

As if Ruhmkorff's insight doesn't complicate our lives enough, S. Mark Heim and John Cobb have expanded the range of options even further by noticing that each of the views discussed so far assumes there is just *one* mountain with *one* top – one salvation, one Ultimate, etc. – which none, one, or more religions might reach. To lay bare this assumption, Heim and Cobb each decided to ask not only the questions of the form "How many religions x " but also questions of the form "How many x 's are there in the first place?" In particular, to "How many religions lead to salvation?" Heim has added "How many salvations are there?" And to "how many religions involve veridical experience the Ultimate?" Cobb has added: "how many kinds of religious experience are there? And how many Ultimates are there to experience?"⁶

As Griffin noted, Heim’s and Cobb’s new questions have the effect of distinguishing the original views earlier as all “identist” because they assume there’s just one mountain top (e.g., one salvation or one kind of religious experience or one Ultimate). In contrast, the “differentialist” views assume there are irreducibly multiple salvations, religious experiences, Ultimates, etc., thus multiple mountain tops. Though Heim and Cobb both seem to be differentialist pluralists, it is in principle possible for someone to be an error theorist, exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist about differentialism just as people are about identism. Such views, though possible, might sound odd, for example, a differentialist exclusivist would believe there is one very handy religion that helps you reach theistic salvation *and* nirvana *and* moksha simultaneously!

Putting the old and new questions together makes the landscape of views of religious diversity contain two kinds of mountain ranges, that is, the identist range that answers “1” to the question “how many x” (where x is salvation, the Ultimate, etc.) and the differentialist range that answers “more than 1.” Both ranges display various answers to the “how many religions do x” in the usual exclusivist, inclusivist, etc., terms. And both ranges need to be redrawn for each diversity question that gets asked. To illustrate the new shape of the resulting landscape, I have drawn it in Figure 16.3, just for the question Heim asks about salvations.

Now we can talk more exactly about these theorists’ varying views of religious diversity. Take Hick (2004). He’s an identist pluralist about *salvation*: he thinks there is one salvation he calls “Reality-centeredness” (identist) and

Figure 16.3 Example of soteriological diversity after Heim and Cobb

that every major religion can help you get from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness (pluralist, so first row, last box). But Hick is *not* an identist pluralist about *truth*. As Ruhmkorff says well, for Hick “claims made by different religions about the Real are noumenally false (because they do not describe the Real as it is in itself) but phenomenally true” because they describe “the Real as mediated by their religious and cultural understandings.” So Hick is an identist error theorist about *noumenal* truth: no religion has true claims about the one Ultimate as it is in itself. He is simultaneously an identist pluralist about *phenomenal* truth: each religion succeeds in knowing the one Ultimate (identist) phenomenally, because there is nobody better than the perceiver to report their perceptions of It (pluralist).

Or consider Heim. He is a differentialist pluralist about *salvation*: he thinks there are many salvations, for example, nirvana, moksha, and theistic salvation are each different spiritual summits (differentialist), and the many religions train you to reach those salvations, for example, vipassana helps you reach nirvana; the yogas, moksha; prayer, salvation (pluralist, so second row, last box). At the same time, if I read him right, Heim is a Christian identist inclusivist about *truth*: he is a realist who thinks there is only one Ultimate to be known (identist) and that only Christianity’s fundamental claims are true about It, though other religions know it in part, too (inclusivist).

Finally, consider Cobb and Griffin’s complementary pluralism, which focuses on at least two different topics in religious diversity. First, they are impressed by how deeply different *religious experiences* are, expressed well by a quote they offer from Steven Katz: “There is no intelligible way that anyone can argue that a ‘no-self’ experience of ‘empty’ calm is the same experience as the experience of intense, loving, intimate relationship between two substantial selves” (Griffin 2005, 46), or the same experience as a sacred experience of the cosmos (49). Inspired by Katz, Cobb is a differentialist pluralist about religious experience. He looks at the wide sweep of human religious experience and sees three durable, radically different, irreducible kinds of religious experience that he calls “theistic, acosmic, and cosmic” (49, differentialist), and he thinks multiple religions help you reach these experiences (pluralist). Specifically, he thinks the theistic religions such as the major monotheisms and some forms of Hinduism involve theistic experiences; the acosmic ones such as Buddhism and other forms of Hinduism involve acosmic experiences; and the cosmic traditions such as Daoism and Native American spiritualities – and the sciences, I would add – involve cosmic experiences.⁷

Cobb’s second move is even more radical. As Griffin says, Cobb “finds it unilluminating to claim . . . that . . . radically different kinds of experience are experiences of the same ultimate reality. ‘[The] evidence,’ suggests Cobb, ‘points to a different hypothesis’” (2005, 47). He believes there are three different kinds of religious experience because there are three different Ultimates getting experienced. Theistic experiences are experiences of the

Supreme Being, “in-formed and the source of forms (such as truth, beauty and justice),” variously named and understood as God (the monotheistic traditions), as Amida Buddha (Buddhism), as Saguna Brahman (Advaita Vedanta in Hinduism), etc. (47). Acosmic experiences are of *Being Itself*, a formless ultimate reality, again variously understood as Emptiness (Buddhism), as Nirguna Brahman (Advaita Vedanta) and as the Godhead (Eckhart in Christianity) (47). Cosmic experiences are of the *Cosmos*, variously understood as the Dao (Daoism) and other cosmic sacreds in Native American spiritualities and more (49). So in addition to being a differentialist pluralist about veridical religious experience, Cobb is a differentialist pluralist about the Ultimate: he thinks there are multiple Ultimates to reach (differentialist), and that multiple religions and spiritualities are doing the reaching (pluralist). So I read him as a differentialist pluralist about knowledge of Ultimacy: the contact with the three Ultimates in the three kinds of religious experiences provides at least some true beliefs about them, though it is an open question whether he would take these beliefs to be merely phenomenally true (“I know that the acosmic ultimate felt thus to me”) or noumenally so (“I know that the acosmic ultimate is thus”). Table 16.1 summarizes the views relayed in this section.

How views on religious diversity help meet Challenges 1 and 2

Here I want to show how holding certain combinations of views on religious diversity can make doing TWW and affiliation natural. I will be using my own current combination of views as a case in point.

About *religious experiences*: Like Cobb and Katz, I suspect that there are truly distinct experiences of the Ultimate by people from various religions (differential pluralism). My own forays into Christianity and Buddhism and what I know of reports of religious experiences confirm their view that there are at least two different kinds of experiences of Ultimacy that are distinct and possibly irreducibly so, viz., the theistic and “empty calm” kinds. It may be that experiences of the cosmos are a distinct third kind. That would explain, for instance, why my long-distance experiences of the silent expanse of outer space and my actual experiences of the spiritually moving places on earth feel so very holy.

I also gravitate toward Heim’s differentialist pluralism about *salvations*. Heim makes sense of the undeniably advanced spiritual states, which adepts in the many religions reach, and does justice to their substantial differences in a way that Hick’s identist pluralism famously does not.⁸

So let’s assume there are radically different religious experiences and irreducibly multiple salvations. *Why* do we have this deep diversity of experiences and salvations? My guess is that they are genuine responses to one Ultimate as Hick and Heim say, not to multiple Ultimates as Cobb says. The empirical facts alone actually underdetermine this choice: in philosophical

Table 16.1 Summary of views on religious diversities in Hick, Heim, and Cobb

<i>Soteriology</i>	<i>How many religions lead to salvation?</i>			
How many salvations are there?	1 Identism 2+ Differentialism	0 error theory	1 exclusivism	1+ inclusivism 2+ pluralism Hick Heim
<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>How many religions have true claims about Ultimacy?</i>			
How many Ultimates are there?	1 Identism 2+ Differentialism	0 error theory Hick for noumenal truth	1 exclusivism	1+ inclusivism Heim 2+ pluralism Hick for phenomenal truth Cobb
<i>Religious experience</i>	<i>How many religions involve veridical religious experience?</i>			
How many irreducible types of religious experience are there?	1 Identism 2+ Differentialism	0 error theory	1 exclusivism	1+ inclusivism 2+ pluralism Cobb

terms, either one or multiple Ultimates could be the “truthmaker” of these deeply diverse experiences; both theories explain the data. Still, I gravitate toward the one-Ultimate hypothesis for a few reasons. First is an empirical reason complicated enough that I am relegating it to a footnote.⁹ Second is Ockham’s razor, an old workhorse in theory choice: all else being equal, “entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity.” The third reason comes from thinking of multiple ultimacy itself. Imagine for a moment that the Cosmos, the Supreme Being and Being Itself are distinct Ultimates. They might, or perhaps must, bear some relation to each other. If so, whatever that totality of Ultimates relating to each other is, why that would be the whole truth, and thus the most total Ultimate (singular), perhaps.¹⁰

Though the one-Ultimate view seems right, it actually heightens the problem of contradiction mentioned in Challenge 2. That is, I cannot say, like Cobb, that it is no wonder we make different claims about Ultimacy: we are talking about different Ultimates! On the one-Ultimate view, we are all talking about the same thing, so why do we contradict each other? To make matters worse, Hick managed to find a way to resolve the contradictions even with just one Ultimate, but I can’t use his way either, because it trades on his idea that no religion involves genuine knowledge of the Ultimate and I think multiple religions do (he is an identist error theorist about knowledge and I am an identist pluralist). I agree with how Hick begins: we each experience the Ultimate through our religious and cultural traditions. But I disagree with how he ends: so none of us are describing the Ultimate as it is in Itself. His ending avoids contradiction because all claims including contradictory ones are relativized to a religion: “Jesus is God” is true about God *as Christians experience God*, “Jesus is not God” is true of God *as Jews experience God*. I, on the other hand, suspect that, if there is an Ultimate and if we are having experiences of It, we sometimes are describing the Ultimate. We almost always fail, because the Ultimate is beyond us in kind and in scope, for example, as Leibniz’s cosmological argument shows deeply. Still, as Maimonides has helped me see, I think we can know some very limited truths about It (e.g., about its actions and some disjunctive claims about Its nature that those actions entail).¹¹ If so, we are in these limited ways (big breath!) really accessing the Ultimate.

These commitments leave me still saddled with the contradictions that Cobb and Hick avoided: How can it be that different religionists say contradictory things about the Ultimate if they are each really accessing It at least sometimes? I can think of at least three ways to read such contradictions given all my commitments earlier. First, because it is so hard to say true things about the Ultimate, sometimes I may be wrong, or you may be wrong, or we may both be wrong, and it may be decades or another lifetime until we know which. If at least one of us is wrong, the contradiction is defused.

Second, sometimes our claims about ultimate things may not be literally true, but rather, for example, a metaphor for, an allegory for, or an instance

of some universal truth. This is the stuff of myth that Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell and others have spoken of so eloquently. For example, the Christian belief that Jesus rose again from the dead to save us from sin may be an instance of a universal truth that, for example, the forces of good are stronger than the forces of death. Perhaps a Hindu might deny that story about Jesus but affirm the story that Prahlad survived Holika's fire, and perhaps the Prahlad story is also an instance of that very same universal truth. If so, what is contradiction at the particular level is actually agreement at the universal level, so the apparent contradiction is defused in an important sense.¹²

The third way to defuse contradiction is inspired by Baruch Spinoza's thought about what he calls "God" – an Ultimate that is read sometimes monistically, sometimes panentheistically. Though I will not aim to stay true to Spinoza here, he has a wonderful idea of the infinite *attributes* of God. He reads each attribute as a different way we can *perceive* God's essence,¹³ each of which is "*complete*" in itself and "*incommensurate*" with the other attributes. Roger Scruton explains Spinoza's attributes with a really helpful analogy:

Imagine two people looking at a picture painted on a board, one an optician, the other a critic. And suppose you ask them to describe what they see. The optician arranges the picture on two axes, and describes it thus: "At $x = 4$, $y = 5.2$, there is a patch of chrome yellow; this continues along the horizontal axis until $x = 5.1$, when it changes to Prussian blue." The critic says: "It is a man in a yellow coat, with a lowering expression, and steely blue eyes." You could imagine these descriptions being *complete* – so complete that they would enable a third party to reconstruct the picture by using them as a set of instructions. But they would have nothing whatever in common [*incommensurate*]. One is about colors arranged on a matrix, the other about the scene that we see in them. You cannot switch from one narrative to the other and still make sense: the man is not standing next to a patch of Prussian blue, but next to the shadow of an oak tree. The Prussian blue is not situated next to a coat sleeve, but next to a patch of chrome yellow.

(9–10, emphases mine)

Though Spinoza most definitely did not put his attributes to work in this way, I take different religionists to be in touch with different attributes of the Ultimate, just as the optician and critic are in touch with different attributes of the painting. This view captures at once both my differentialist pluralism about religious experiences (like Cobb's) and my identism about ultimacy (like Hick's): some religionists experience the acosmic attribute of the Ultimate; others, the cosmic, and still others, the theistic, but these are all experiences of the same Ultimate, just different attributes of It. Unlike Hick,

Figure 16.4 Partialism about knowledge of the Ultimate

these experiences of the attributes can produce knowledge of the Ultimate itself. In the same way that both the optician's and critic's accounts of the painting are actually *true* of the painting – it really does have those colors in that order and it really does contain that scene – so also each religionist's account of the Ultimate can be actually true of it. Call this Scruton-Spinozistic inspired view “partialism,” and give it a place between inclusivism and pluralism on the identist mountains in the question about *knowledge* of the Ultimate (the second question in Table 16.1).

Partialism addresses Challenge 1. Because the Ultimate has multiple (maybe infinite) attributes and each religion grasps just one of these, no religion has full knowledge of the Ultimate solo. Affiliators must go outside their affiliation and pool their knowledge with other affiliators to know the Ultimate more fully (see Figure 16.4).¹⁴

Partialism also addresses Challenge 2. Different religionists can seem to contradict each other, but that is because they are describing different attributes of the Ultimate. We can see that the contradiction is merely apparent when we relativize the religionists' claims to their respective attributes, just as Hick did when he relativized claims to their respective phenomena.

Challenge 3: a change of heart

There remains Challenge 3, the risk of adding new beliefs that, though consistent with the home beliefs, distract a person from the home beliefs and thereby weaken affiliation.

Challenge 3 is embodied in the story of the one-time Henri Le Saux turned Swami Abishiktananda. Born in France in 1910, he began his formal spiritual journey as a Christian Benedictine monk who eventually felt called to India to seek an even deeper contemplative life. Over decades of life in India, his attraction to Hindu over Christian forms grew so much that by the last year of his life in 1973, he wrote: “The discovery of Christ's ‘I AM’ is the ruin of any Christic ‘theology,’ for all notions are burnt within the fire of experience” (said in 1973, see 2019). Swami Abishiktananda seems to have failed Challenge 3, for worse or for better. His focus on Hindu truths outside his Christianity, though not formally inconsistent with it, eventually

transformed his focus and spirit enough that he lost his Christian affiliation altogether.

Even though such loss of affiliation can happen in the face of new truths from an outside tradition, it also can *not* happen. In fact, in many of the other cases I have read of people who have gone out seriously enough to other affiliations that they identify with a hybrid or double belong, the person has kept their home affiliation.¹⁵ They are living proof that it is possible to affiliate seriously and do TWV seriously.

Conclusion

To return to our initial question: “Can a transreligious theologian take account of spiritual truths outside their confession, or would they have to give up or loosen their affiliation to do this?” There are three good reasons to think that one cannot retain affiliation while doing TWV: one’s affiliation should be truth enough; going beyond affiliation risks being persuaded by outside beliefs that contradict one’s affiliation; and being distracted by them, too. Though the story of Swami Abishiktananda shows us that these three challenges are real, we also confirmed that they all can be and sometimes are met. In particular, if one adopts partialism and thinks that one’s own religion is a way of coming to know just one of the possibly infinite attributes of the Ultimate, and that other religions are too, then an Ultimate-besotted affliator may well venture out to other religions to get a fuller picture of the Ultimate she loves. With partialism, she also expects contradiction on the way: perhaps one of us is wrong, or perhaps there is some more universal truth we both believe here, or perhaps we are talking in incommensurate ways, you tracing one of the attributes, I another. Finally, if in this process of learning she should fall for another religion’s path, and though this disaffiliation is a genuine loss – akin to loss of one’s home or first language – provided there really is an Ultimate, and provided both religions are dwelling in Its attributes, then the genuine loss gives way to a genuine gain, a new way to see the Ultimate all over again.¹⁶

Notes

- 1 Islam may be an exception, because it requires only saying the *Shahadah* three times earnestly, not necessarily even in the presence of another Muslim, let alone an imam or other leader.
- 2 I also follow Ruhmkorff in thinking this applies just to “core” propositions, however these may get identified, because “it would be absurdly stringent to insist that all propositions associated with a religion be true.” That would, for example, rule out denominational differences and more.
- 3 “Views of religious diversity” drops the etymological reference to God in “theology” and drops the word “pluralism” to make it clear that the views under consideration do not all talk about God and are not all species of pluralism – whatever exactly that might be (see Griffin (2005, chapter 1) for the ambiguity of “pluralism”).

- 4 My exposition here is taken from Ruhmkorff (2013).
- 5 In the first section, he writes: "We can think of the debate between pluralism, exclusivism, and inclusivism at the level of salvation (are only faithful adherents to one tradition saved?), rationality (are only faithful adherents to one religious tradition rational?), doctrine (are the fundamental claims of only one religion true?), religious experience (do members of only one tradition experience the divine?), and so on."
- 6 These questions are my paraphrases. Heim's question is a major point in *Salvations*. Apparently Cobb had this same idea before Heim, see Griffin (2005, chapter 2). Both have good company in the other. See Cobb's additional questions laid out in Griffin (2005, chapters 1 and 2).
- 7 Note that an identist about religious experiences would think that human religious experience across time and place is really all the same. Such a view may sound like a nonstarter, given the differences between individuals, but think of it as close to the way many people read the experience of seeing green (to couch one vexed topic in the terms of another!). An identist view of seeing green would say that the experience of seeing green is the same among humans, given our similar biologies and the fact that green things emit light at the same wavelength worldwide. That sameness is there, someone might say, even if it expressed in different words and reactions across cultures. So also, perhaps, with religious experiences, given our similar needs for the Ultimate and the Ultimate's constancy across space-time.
- 8 I wonder if the fact that I am a differentialist pluralist on both counts follows from a genus–species relationship between religious experiences and salvations respectively, e.g., if salvation necessarily involves a religious experience that ushers in a new spiritual way of being, then the salvations would be multiple *because* they involve religious experiences that are.
- 9 Cobb's own description of the experiences indicates that it is not unusual for a single person to have multiple kinds of religious experience at one go: "The religious experience of Western mystics seems to be at once of theistic and acosmic reality – one might say that it is of the theistic as embodying the acosmic reality or of the acosmic as qualified by the theistic reality" (Griffin 2005, 50). Although these double experiences could be genuine responses to two Ultimates that are really there to be experienced (I see the painting while hearing the clock tick), it seems more likely that they come from a single Ultimate complex enough to produce both at once (I see the hands on the clock and hear *it* tick). Otherwise, we need the two Ultimates to coordinate in a way that permits multiple mystics over centuries and across the globe to keep being able to access them both simultaneously. That sort of relation between the Ultimates and constant co-access by the mystics is guaranteed if the two Ultimates are one thing.
- 10 There is a deep metaphysical question here: What is the difference really between three separate Ultimates and a single Ultimate that has three parts? Perhaps the difference is the kind of unity in the single Ultimate. If it is merely formal – that all we are doing is drawing a circle around the three Ultimates and saying their unity consists in being able to be "setted," as it were – why then the difference between the One and the Many is not real, at least not concrete. But if the unity consists in something substantial, e.g. if they bear a relationship of love to each other as in social Trinitarian views, and if this love is itself a "thing" they bring forth in the universe, above and beyond the Ultimates themselves, why then there *is* a real difference between a single Ultimate and the three distinct Ultimates, and in this example you can even name it. It is love.

- 11 See Leibniz (2017) in Clark and Maimonides's *The Guide of the Perplexed*, as well as Diller (2019) for more.
- 12 I used to think the move to the abstract level was a last gasp – that if a claim was not literally true, it was false in the most important sense. But lately I have been thinking that a claim that is universally true is true in the most important sense because such claims hold everywhere and everywhen, not just at one point in space-time.
- 13 Spinoza wrote: “By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence.” (D4 in his *Ethics*)
- 14 All three of these views are echoed in Martin's (2016) *God: An Autobiography*: “‘One of the things I put into the universe, one of the things I am, is the natural order . . . There is a frequency . . . and I am it. This is one way I make myself available to men and animals.’ . . . ‘And the Chinese were adept at picking up the signal?’ ‘Of course. . . . People cannot take everything in at once. They have to specialize and the Chinese have specialized in this.’ [Cobb's cosmic experience]. ‘With little or no sense of a personal God [Cobb's theistic experience], didn't they lose a lot?’ ‘Everybody loses a lot. No one gets it all [partialism about knowledge]. That is fine. They all help me realize, express Myself. They are all part of the big story’ ” (chapter 29, 196–197, unpublished manuscript).
- 15 Francis Clooney is a good example of someone who maintains his Christian affiliation in Hindu-Christian hybridity. Robert Kennedy, SJ, and Paul Knitter are both good examples of double-belongers who maintain their Christian affiliation while adding a second Buddhist affiliation to it. For explanations of hybridity and double belonging, see Diller (2016), especially the section on Religious Orientations.
- 16 My sincere thanks to Jerry Martin and Linda Mercadante for their helpful comments as this chapter took shape.

References

- Diller, Jeanine, 2016. “Multiple Religious Orientation.” *Open Theology* 2: 338–353.
- Diller, Jeanine. 2019. “Being Perfect is Not Necessary for Being God.” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. 11 (2): 43–64.
- Griffin, David Ray, ed. 2005. *Deep Religious Pluralism*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Heim, Mark S. 2006. *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. doi:10.1163/157254397x00313
- Hick, John. 2004. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. 2nd ed. New Haven, CT: Yale Press.
- Knitter, Paul F. 2013. *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*. Croydon, UK: Oneworld.
- Leibniz, Gottfried W. 2017. “On the Ultimate Origination of Things.” In *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Kelly James Clark. Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press.
- Martin, Jerry L. 2016. *God: An Autobiography*. Doylestown, PA: Calladium Publishing Company.
- McEntee, Rory, and Adam Bucko. 2016. *The New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. doi:10.1017/hor.2016.103

- Ruhmkorff, Samuel. 2013. "The Incompatibility Problem and Religious Pluralism Beyond Hick." *Philosophy Compass* 8 (5): 510–522. doi:10.1111/phc3.12032
- Scruton, Roger. 1999. *Spinoza*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Swami Abishiktananda. 2019. "The Call of the Self." www.abhishiktananda.org.in/html/life-of-swami-abhishiktananda.php (accessed February 9, 2019).
- Toulmin, Stephen, Richard Rieke, and Allan Janik. 1984. *An Introduction to Reasoning*. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.