A Modest Solution to the Problem of Religious Disagreement

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I develop a new recipe for solving the problem of religious disagreement suggested by the injunction to cultivate intellectual humility conjoined with awareness of human immaturity in deep time. The ingredients brought to the table include such things as noticing the full breadth and texture of the religious propositional field, observing the previously hidden areas of agreement this exposes, making a differential judgment of importance in relation to religious propositions, applying the concept of a position, and finding a better home for an emphasis on detailed beliefs than contexts of inquiry can provide. Special attention is given to the modesty of the proposal, which asks relatively little of religious practitioners while reconceiving this area of discussion.

1. Introduction

Disagreements on intellectual matters in and between religious traditions have existed throughout recorded history. And they certainly exist today. Readers will immediately be able to generate multiple examples. Of course, intellectual disagreements are present at virtually every level and in just about every context of human life. Nothing new here, you may say. But in religious contexts one sees certain complicating and intensifying factors not present just anywhere. I mean the multi-faceted and deep emotionality and loyalty connecting the religious practitioner to the divine, as she sees it, and to her religious community and traditions. Because of these factors, religious intellectual disagreements can seem to be, of their very nature, more intractable than many others.

It may well be that what philosophers can do will have very little effect on this sort of thing. Practical, large scale social developments, someone may say, are more likely to be what determines whether such disagreements are aggravated, whether they are eliminated, or whether they continue in a more healthy fashion, without the destructive consequences that so commonly attend them today. But philosophers can identify and explore possible solutions to problems of religious disagreements which under the right circumstances, impossible to predict beforehand, might conceivably be of some practical value. They can make recommendations which are discussed amongst themselves and, perhaps in some refined form, made available to others. *New* recommendations or new variations on old recommendations are especially to be sought, as they can breathe life into an old discussion, possibly enabling a fresh and more fruitful perspective.

Such a fresh perspective is my aim in this paper. I will develop a modest proposal, modest in more than one sense but also in the sense that it demands relatively little from religious practitioners, while nonetheless reconceiving the relevant terrain. The perspective I shall explore is grounded in the injunction to cultivate intellectual humility (call this IH) in conjunction with certain facts about scientific or deep time (call these T). I propose that by bringing the conjunction of these things (IH & T) to bear on issues about religious disagreement, we will be enabled to see something new – to discover a new recipe for dealing with religious disagreement.

Let me say something about the temporal facts I have in mind when I refer to T, and about how I am characterizing the intellectual humility that IH tells us to cultivate – and then we can get on with the development of that recipe.

T is the conjunction of the following propositions:

Deep Time. Planet Earth was hosting life for several billion years before *Homo sapiens* appeared on the scene and will be habitable for up to a billion years more.

Our Place. In between the billions of years behind us and the billion to come, *Homo sapiens*, still a youthful species by hominid standards, has just started systematic inquiry on our planet; the roughly 5,000 years we've spent on this make up about the *first two hundred thousandth* of that potential billion-year future.

It is important to note that anyone emphasizing intellectual humility in philosophy will have to accept (IH & T), given that T is not at all controversial but represents the consensus of relevant opinion in science. Of course determining what T *means* for us in philosophy is a challenging task, and one that cannot be addressed fully and in its own right here.[i] Very little will be assumed on this in the present paper – only that, speaking temporally and in scientific terms, inquiry on our planet is still in its infancy, and that when we have full absorbed this, together with what is already known about other facets of human immaturity, we will rightly allow that on many matters of great concern deep insight may require a great deal more time and effort from Earth's creatures than we have yet put in – this is epistemically possible (by which I mean that there is no adequate reason to believe the relevant proposition to be false). Notice that one can say this without registering any confidence that our species or inquiry on Earth will survive, or that any future intellectual efforts the planet might see will be smoothly progressive.

How about intellectual humility? How should this be characterized? Discussions of intellectual humility may take a traditional approach that locates it between diffidence at one extreme and arrogance at the other. But since human beings seem naturally to tilt toward the latter, views on intellectual humility often emphasize how it moderates an inappropriately inflated view of oneself involving beliefs, desires, and emotions that come rather easily to human agents. Consider the influential perspective of Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood (2007), who say that intellectual humility is opposed not just to arrogance but to all of the qualities in the following list: "arrogance, vanity, conceit, egotism, hyper-autonomy, grandiosity, pretentiousness, snobbishness, impertinence (presumption), haughtiness, self-righteousness, domination, selfish ambition, and self-complacency" (2007, p. 236). Following the recent work of Samuelson et al. (2013: 4-5, 21-46, 67-74), one might extend this long list even further, adding overconfidence in one's own views, being overswift to judge, closed to the views of others and unhelpful to them in their own inquiry-related efforts as well as unforgiving of their mistakes, absolutist in one's stance, dogmatic, unreflective, and more concerned for closure than for accurate cognition. A somewhat different perspective is forwarded by Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder (2015), who hold that we should distinguish between improper pride and intellectual humility, and should identify the latter with being properly attentive to, and owning, one's limitations.

Who is right here? It won't hurt to leave this question open. Indeed, I am going to accept a broad and disjunctive understanding of intellectual humility so as to allow for a large space in which arguments having *something* to do with it, and also interestingly related to religious diversity, may be found. This might not be the right way to go if there were a consensus among philosophers on the nature of intellectual humility, but no general consensus has yet emerged. In fact, intellectual humility has recently become the subject of renewed and intense discussion in philosophy.

There is however a general consensus that intellectual humility is important and should be cultivated. The vices to which intellectual humility is opposed are not just intrinsically bad qualities but threaten to undermine human inquiry in various ways. Individuals and groups with such qualities as these will find it hard to learn from each other, to notice when their beliefs need to be revised or dropped, to think about things long enough to get anything close to a body of evidence representative of what the Total Evidence (the evidence as seen by an omniscient being) would show, to cooperate with others on difficult intellectual tasks, to stay focused on the goals of truth and understanding, and so on. These are some of the reasons why intellectual humility, by being opposed to all such things and allowing its own contrary faces to be seen, is an intellectual virtue and should be cultivated by humans, as IH recommends.

The recipe in broad strokes

It will not be too hard to see how IH might suggest that certain changes are needed in the area of religious disagreement. Adding T to the mix will only serve to make this seem more obvious. How can religious people at so *early* a stage of the possible human story be so confident about *ultimate* things, when a little study of religion shows equal confidence among people equally good and intelligent about *contrary* views? Some of those 'other people' are of course far away – take, for example, the metaphysically non-dualist picture of things touted by certain Hindu religious figures in India as compared with the decided dualism of people who sharply distinguish God from the world across the globe in America. But others will always be close at hand. Consider only the different ways of being Christian in North America, some of which (e.g., Protestant fundamentalism) won't even allow for others (e.g., Roman Catholics) to be considered genuinely Christian! It's hard not to see over-confidence and indeed a variety of forms of intellectual self-importance and self-complacency in many instances of such religious disagreement.

Arguably, the implications of T for religion even without the help of IH are radical. And if the scaling back and reorienting that it seems to call for were to occur, religious disagreement would hardly be an issue. Religious practitioners would adopt a nondoxastic faith of the sort that is starting to receive serious discussion in philosophy of religion (Alston 1996, Schellenberg 2005, Audi 2008, Howard-Snyder 2013), some of it applying the concept of a nonbelieving acceptance. And the cognitive aspect of religious practice and faith would be far more general than the details that presently divide one religious person from another – perhaps something like the notion of a metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically ultimate reality, an idea I have called ultimism. Taking IH on board only seems to add force to these conclusions.

But I will not be repeating or expanding on arguments for these ideas here. Instead I will take a step back and focus on a more modest proposal that is fueled by (IH & T) and would still suffice, if accepted, to resolve in every desirable sense the problem of religious disagreement. This proposal urges religious practitioners to recognize that at the most general and fundamental level, their cognitive commitments overlap with those of practitioners with whom they regard themselves as locked in disagreement. And it recommends, given (IH & T), that in intellectual contexts they unite with these others in endorsing belief of this general proposition (perhaps a conjunctive one) while *not* emphasizing belief where their view on the divisive details is concerned but rather putting it forward as their *religious position or positions*, and furthermore adopting an investigative imperative in relation to matters of religious detail within the framework of agreed generalia.

Perhaps the more general proposition is ultimism and refers to a triply ultimate reality; perhaps it refers, more modestly, to triple transcendence or makes use of some other but

similarly general notion or notions. There are various possibilities (and although in spirit they may share something with John Hick's famous proposals – see his 1989 – none need exhibit the vagueness and seeming incoherence of his notorious 'Real'). In any case, for each *disputed* proposition there is going to be some more general religious proposition which it entails and is *not* disputed by others. Now this more general proposition will be logically equivalent to the disjunction of a large set of more detailed propositions, including the propositions on which religious practitioners are presently divided. (For example, ultimism, as well as any triple transcendence claim, is equivalent to a disjunction including among its disjuncts both a number of conjunctive propositions representing the claims of the various theistic traditions and a variety of non-theistic conjunctive alternatives representing other of the world's religious traditions.) So in effect what is being recommended is that religious practitioners unite in endorsing belief of the disjunction while treating one or another of its disjuncts as their religious position and exploring diverse positions together in the light of what all agree is true, seeking to realize a fuller consensus over time. Perhaps they will also believe their position – perhaps their involvement in religious practice will be such as to prevent them from being able to otherwise – but, given (IH & T), the fact that they do, if it is a fact, will be seen practically in relation to their commitment rather than having any significant role in intellectual discussion.

Let me now break this down into a number of more manageable parts. In effect, what we will have, when I am finished, is a recipe for how, given (IH & T), to deal appropriately with issues of religious disagreement.

Notice the full breadth and texture of the propositional field

By 'the propositional field' I shall here mean the full range of propositions that would be counted as religious in the world today – as belonging to the religious worldview of one or another individual or group. (Of course there can be changes in such things over time, so the propositional field will not necessarily be exactly the same from moment to moment.) What religious people in disagreement with other religious people often don't notice is how *broad* is the relevant field. They think of propositions such as 'Jesus is the Son of God,' 'Through Jesus God will reconcile the world to himself,' and 'We should seek to be like Jesus,' which are close to the center of their religious intellectual attention, but don't notice all the propositions these propositions individually or conjunctively *entail*, which, when exposed, they will also regard themselves as believing. So, for example, the propositions about Jesus individually or conjunctively entail the propositions that there is a God, that God cares about the world, that there is a spiritual reality, that there is something wrong with the world, that we ought to cultivate a life full of love and other virtues, that the ultimate reality is divine, and so on.

A certain sub-class of entailed propositions, including most of those just mentioned, can be seen to give to their part of the propositional field a different *texture*, one that tends to go unnoticed until it's pointed out, since they are much more *general* than the propositions at the center of religious people's attention: they say less, they have less content. And so 'Jesus is the Son of God', while implying that there is a God, also says more than this: it has more content, more detail. And similar relations can be seen to hold between other of the propositions listed.

Now under the influence of IH, both philosophical investigators and the religious themselves will be open to having their understanding deepened on these points, and sufficiently reflective to learn from them. Reflecting specifically on T, and in connection therewith seeking to avoid overconfidence and too great a need for closure and to attend appropriately to their limitations, they will notice that the items from the propositional field of religion that are at the center of the attention for religious people are often very detailed indeed, yielding many ways of

being wrong, and at least become ready to think about whether a preoccupation with such details might, given T, be premature.

Notice hidden areas of agreement

When one acquires a more textured view of the propositional field, noticing that some propositions in it are quite detailed and others much more general, one is in a position also to notice that disagreement tends to center on the *detailed* propositions, and that when it comes to the more general propositions, there is actually a great deal of *agreement* across diverse forms of religion. For example, the more general propositions mentioned in the previous sections are believed not by Christians alone but also by other theists – and some of them (e.g., that something is wrong with the world, and that there is a spiritual reality) can indeed be found in virtually every religious tradition. Noticing this is the second ingredient in our recipe. (IH & T) should help to ensure that it is taken seriously and stirred in deeply. Following IH, for example, will mean that one is working against the sort of intellectual egotism or hyper-autonomy or domination that might make disagreement seem more interesting than agreement and inhibit serious attention to the latter. And, reflecting on T, recognizing how early is the present stage of religious inquiry, those who find others agreeing with them on ultimate matters will take encouragement from this fact and think it has special significance (even while recognizing that it is no guarantor of having latched onto the truth), much as we value consensus in scientific matters. If a goal of human inquiry is widely realized knowledge and understanding on important matters, then agreement is at least a necessary condition of achieving this goal, and we will rightly think ourselves further ahead for having attained it.

Make a differential judgment of importance

But a big problem here, someone may now suggest, is that those *general* propositions on which agreement can be obtained are also the least interesting intellectually! Having relatively little content, they can tell us relatively little about the world. Various insulting adjectives may be bandied about in this connection – barren, thin, bland, empty, anemic, spiritually unnourishing... But precisely here (IH & T) will show its worth. It is because we have been assuming that we are in a position to see relevant matters clearly and in detail that this conventional view of general religious propositions has been able to take hold. If now, meditating on T, we question this assumption, agreement on generalia may become more interesting. At an early stage of the hunt we should be happy to see the broad outlines of our quarry and suspicious of conflicting detailed reports. Recognizing T, it would reveal arrogance or presumption if we were to insist that we already know how the whole religious story goes, and so IH too makes an important contribution at this point.

(IH & T) also allows for these points to be deepened. For general religious propositions may have much more significant content than we had thought, and arguably include the most *important* of propositions in the propositional field. Let's take these two thoughts in turn.

First, where is all the content I've just referred to? Well, suppose we consider *ultimism*, the claim that there is a reality triply ultimate: ultimate in the nature of things (metaphysically), in inherent value (axiologically), and in the importance it has in relation to our own deepest good (soteriologically). This general claim is entailed by very many propositions across the propositional field, and so it is one on which much religious agreement can be found. But is it bland, barren, or spiritually unnourishing? Well, only if *its* entailments are ignored might one be tempted to say such a thing. As I have argued elsewhere, if ultimism is true,

> then there is a reality transcendent of the natural world. If it is true, then a certain popular sort of philosophical naturalism (which claims that there is no such transcendent reality) is false. If ultimism is true, then indeed it is a dimension of reality transcending nature that is most fundamental and important. If it is true, then the core of reality is on the side of the good, and indeed in some sense *is* the good. If it is true, then – even though we might have a hard time seeing exactly how – the universe or our environment in the largest sense is, as William James would have said, friendly, that is, not indifferent to our deepest needs. If ultimism is true, furthermore, then it is through associating ourselves with the reality of which it speaks that we can best make contact with true value. If it is true, then the sort of inquiry which, if successful, will bring us to the deepest understanding of the world is religious in nature... There is also the fact that certain propositions are entailed by simple ultimism taken together with obvious truths. For example, since, given the fact of deeply damaged earthly lives or earthly lives cut short, the promise represented by the term 'salvific' could hardly otherwise be fulfilled, we can derive the claim that there will be some sort of afterlife for at least some of us. (Schellenberg 2009, p. 32)

I dare anyone to call this content uninteresting! And a similar comment would apply to the entailments of such general religious propositions as the claim that there is a Divine reality, that there is a transcendent spiritual reality, that the ultimate reality is good, and so on.

Second, why suppose such general propositions, on which religious agreement prevails, so far from being uninteresting, in fact include the most important of religious propositions? The answer is that they include the most *fundamental* and *stable* propositions in any religious worldview of today and so the most fundamental and stable propositions in the propositional field. By this I mean that everything else in the field – all that detail over which conflict rages – depends for its truth on the truth of certain general and fundamental propositions whereas they do not depend for their truth on details, and so while the details may ebb and flow under the pressure of inquiry, general and fundamental propositions are much more likely to stand firm over the long term – something that will please any religious person who has been apprised of the truth of T. Of course, we will want to say that *some details or other* are true if the relevant generalia are, but (IH & T) will help us at least be more open to the thought that we could still be a long way from being able to identify what the right details are.

Consider ultimism again, and compare it with the more detailed theism, which claims that there is a personal God. Theism cannot be true unless ultimism is, whereas ultimism can be true even if theism is false and no more than an early attempt to provide a correct elaboration for ultimism. Ultimism is therefore more fundamental than theism. For this reason it is more stable, and so in a pretty obvious sense more important. Or take the even more detailed Christian claim that Jesus is the Son of God and biblical accounts of his behaviour provide the correct model to follow in faith and life. This cannot be true unless a life infused with love and compassion and other virtues is the correct model, but *that* claim could be true even if Jesus had never existed! The second claim is therefore more fundamental and stable and also more important, religiously.

Now it may be replied here that there are certain respects in which *detailed* religious propositions are the most important – personally, for example, in respect of establishing a person's or group's religious identity and nourishing them spiritually. But we will be accommodating detailed religious propositions and their peculiar importance later in the fashioning of this recipe. For now it's enough to see that *intellectually speaking* (and that is how most religious people are speaking as they express their disagreements), certain more general

propositions also have the greater importance, because they are the more fundamental and stable.

There may also seem to be a problem about the identification of these 'most important' propositions. After all, both generality and detail are a matter of degree. So how much of the former (or how little of the latter) does a proposition in the religious propositional field need to have in order to fall into the relevant class? Won't any answer here be arbitrary?

The key is again to think about fundamentality, and to accommodate the fact that religious disagreement is a dynamic not a static phenomenon. Some of the general religious propositions (and we've already seen that their entailments should not be ignored, so that we end up with a sizable conjunction of propositions here even if we start with just *one* general and fundamental proposition) will be fundamental in relation to all the disputed propositions – will be entailed by *all* of the latter even when the converse doesn't hold for any of these cases, so that agreement at the deepest level is assured despite disagreement among those propositions. Of course disputes ebb and flow, and religion itself is always evolving in subtle ways. So the relevant point should be made in relation to this changing landscape of religion. For any disputed proposition in any particular context of disagreement (or in the world at large) at any time, there is going to be some more general religious proposition (perhaps a conjunctive one) which it entails and is *not* disputed by the other propositions involved in the disagreement. In that context and at that time, *that proposition* (together of course with its entailments) falls into the category of 'most important.' Just how to state this proposition is not my concern in this paper – though I have been suggesting possible components here and there. It is enough that it must exist and can be found.

Suppose that religious people and religious investigators, inspired by (IH & T), were to see and affirm the two points I have been discussing: that the relevant general religious propositions, in virtue of their entailments, can lay claim to quite a lot of interesting content, and indeed are the most important religious propositions, intellectually. Remembering the first ingredient in our recipe, they would have to say that the most general propositions in the religious propositional field have moved from the periphery, or from a region of which most are barely aware, to the very *center*. Thinking also of the second, they would be in a position to say that the most *important* religious propositions, intellectually speaking, are also those on which religious people are *agreed*.

Discriminate doxastically

If we should discriminate among items in the propositional field in respect of importance, perhaps we should discriminate among them in other ways too. The next ingredient in our recipe becomes apparent when, with the help of (IH & T), we see that a corresponding *doxastic* discrimination, or more precisely, discrimination with respect to an emphasis in contexts of intellectual discussion on belief-worthiness, is called for. It's important to see what I'm not saying here. In line with my ambition, mentioned earlier, to have a solution to the problem of religious disagreement that – while it may ask us to reconceive the religious terrain – is modest "in the sense that it demands relatively little from religious practitioners," I am not saying that religious people should *believe* only the most important religious propositions, and so cultivate a lack of belief for detailed and divisive propositions, but rather, more narrowly, that *in contexts of intellectual discussion*, belief and belief-worthiness should only be *emphasized* for the more important propositions.

But what is meant by 'emphasize' here? To see, notice that the problem of religious disagreement involves disagreement in contexts of intellectual discussion not just among beliefs but among rival and competing *endorsements* of belief – and this across the whole propositional

field. That is, religious people today typically not only believe a whole set of religious propositions, detailed and general, but will endorse and (therefore) defend this attitude of believing for all propositions in the set when discussing religious questions and their view on the truth of things in discussion with others. This sort of behaviour emphasizes belief. And it is this emphasis that (IH & T) asks us to reserve for the most important and so the most general religious propositions, for all the humility-related reasons already mentioned in our recipe and because it is these propositions that are most likely to remain worthy of belief through all the changes that we have been sensitized by T to be ready for in times ahead.

Now if such an emphasis were reserved for these propositions, we would have *agreement* among belief endorsements in contexts of religious intellectual discussion rather than disagreement, and also a recognition that this agreement concerned the (intellectually) most important religious propositions. Of course intellectual discussion should be expected to continue – for those propositions, certainly, but also (perhaps especially) for the other, more detailed propositions. And there, of course, disagreement would persist. Indeed, I have allowed that disagreements in *belief* might persist. So what really has changed? We will need the rest of the recipe to see.

Apply the concept of a 'position'

At bottom, what changes is how – following IH as instructed by T – one chooses to handle the fact of one's belief. And central to this is the fact that even if one believes a detailed religious proposition at odds with others, even if one can't help believing (after all, belief is involuntary), one doesn't need to *emphasize* belief in contexts of intellectual discussion. Religious disagreement today, on each of various sides, tends to have something like the following form: "I believe p and you believe q, which entails not-p. Now here's why you're wrong and why you should believe p instead of q!" One needn't approach things this way, even if one continues to believe. Instead, one may trade an emphasis on belief for the humble presentation of one's religious intellectual *position* and a willingness to discuss it humbly with others. The humility we see here is, as I have suggested, humility with the particular coloring afforded by T, a humility that because it recognizes our place in time and our possible immaturity seeks to avoid conceit and self-complacency, to own limitations, and has no desire to be absolutist, dogmatic, or unreflective. But here we can also add this new feature of humility: it wishes to avoid *diffidence* too, and to promote inquiry, which all intellectual virtues serve, and so is willing to take a stand.

Given (IH & T), therefore, what believing attitude one has and how it interacts with other believing attitudes is not the important thing in religious intellectual contexts. What one feels or thinks to be the case, in the peculiar manner of belief, and thus on reflection would say is supported by the Total Evidence (the relevant information as it would be seen by an omniscient being), is not the important thing. What is important is that an attitude of inquiry prevail when one leaves church or ashram and enters intellectual discussion, and what is important in inquiry is the position one brings to it on what the *available* evidence seems to one best to support, with everyone open to today's available evidence being much enriched in the future – perhaps even through the conversations that are thus entered into.

But we need more clarity about this concept of holding or having a position, and of how it relates to believing. Let's say that S has (or holds) the position that p if and only if S accepts that p and is disposed to mobilize and defend p in any discussion among competing views about an issue or issues to which p can be seen as a response. I mean "accepts" to be taken in L. Jonathan Cohen's sense (Cohen 1992). According to Cohen, "to accept that p is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that p – i.e. of including that proposition or rule

among one's premisses for deciding what to do or think in a particular context," and this whether or not one also believes the proposition (Cohen 1992, p. 4). One might believe and accept at the same time, as in the case of just about anyone participating in religious discussions today, but one can also accept without believing. And, as in effect we have already seen, one can accept without *emphasizing* one's belief. Furthermore, one can accept that p without making it one's position simply by being disposed to keep what one accepts to oneself and not introduce it into discussion in contexts of inquiry.

Now to avoid diffidence in contexts of religious intellectual discussion, one may well wish to avoid thus keeping how one sees the available evidence to oneself. But wishing also to avoid other manifestations of a lack of intellectual humility, and in recognition of T, one will furthermore avoid emphasizing such belief as one has, instead nurturing a conversation among people and their positions, which one can do without ever thinking about belief. Again, at an early stage, what inquiry needs are not beliefs put forward as such, with all the bitter conflict that can result between people equally sure that inquiry on the relevant matter need proceed no further. What it needs is beliefs deliberately *put aside* and positions put forward that engage other positions in useful discussion, discussion that in some way moves inquiry forward towards an eventual consensus on the details, which anyone who is not deterred by an un-humble desire to dominate in the discussion will see as desirable. Such inquiry, it may be noted, can move forward not only when new evidence turns up that seems decisively to confirm one side or another in a debate, but also when one is able to expose and explore in detail new ideas that, even if false, are stepping stones to eventual discovery; or find new uses that are similarly profitable for old ideas that have been discarded; or help inquirers to set aside conventionally accepted ideas that only distract from true insight or potentially profitable new inquiry; or suggest questions for further investigation which ends up having one of these consequences, and so on. And it can move forward in these ways even – I would say especially – through a conversation among positions in which the acquisition or defense of belief is never regarded as a desideratum.

Now it may be that the available evidence seems to tell participants in religious discussion the truth of the matter and leaves them quite sure that they are right on the details, even at an early stage of the discussion. Though this will involuntarily bring belief with it, when one participates in such discussion, deepening one's voluntary engagement with what's going on and seeking both religious and intellectual maturity, which includes intellectual humility, one can ensure that the fact of one's belief, as it were, disappears to the rear. One need not put forward the sort of "finalizing" attitude that (IH & T) proscribes. What one brings to inquiry can instead be one's present position, a case of intellectual acceptance that – to the extent that it remains unaffected by the discussion – gets passed on with the cheerful and humble acknowledgment that future inquirers, better equipped, may in some respect see things differently.

Remove from 'disagreement' its negative connotations

Imagine religious people doing everything we have described so far. In a way little has changed, since the same detailed religious propositions and indeed the same detailed beliefs are to be associated with the same people. This is what allows me to claim the relevant sort of modesty for my solution to the problem of religious disagreement. But in another way, everything has changed. We have seen that the neglected general religious propositions entailed by detailed ones include the most fundamental and intellectually the most important propositions believed by religious people, and that *all* believe them and can endorse such belief together. And we have seen that the *other* religious propositions, the detailed and divisive religious propositions that

tend to get all the attention, are not just intellectually less important but also the most vulnerable in light of T. Under the influence of IH they will calmly be discussed together by religious people who put them forward as their positions rather than objects of belief (even though believed they are), pushing toward an eventual fuller consensus among the religious.

So long as that discussion continues, disagreement continues too – both disagreements of belief unemphasized and disagreements of position emphasized in a context of inquiry. But given what we have seen, no religious person any longer can say that any other is *fundamentally* misled; indeed, they may be motivated to emphasize that fundamentally, and so on the most important matters, intellectually speaking there is agreement. This already should suffice to take from the residual 'disagreement' many of the negative connotations of that term. Moving outward from an agreed center people are discussing details – what's so disagreeable about that? Indeed, over time, we should expect the residual disagreements of position to take on much more positive connotations, expressible by the use of such terms as 'stimulating' and 'adventurous.'

Clearly the general theme here is that of discovered intellectual unity and solidarity. And though the point about removing disagreeable connotations from 'disagreement' that it enables is largely implicit in the previous ingredients of our recipe, we can also sharpen that point further by developing the mentioned theme a bit. Conceptually, we can see more of the *basis* for it by thinking about how the fundamental and general proposition mentioned earlier, on which all are agreed, may be conceived as a large disjunction of which the various more detailed sets of propositions believed by religious individuals and groups in the world today are disjuncts. A disjunction and its disjuncts are very closely related! And in effect what is being recommended here is that religious practitioners unite in endorsing belief of the disjunction, keeping that at the center, while treating one or another of its disjuncts as their religious position and exploring diverse positions together in the larger light of what all agree is true, seeking to realize a fuller consensus over time.

I have not identified this or that general religious proposition as the 'right' one in this connection: the point goes through if, as I have elsewhere recommended, one selects ultimism but also if one goes with such a proposition as that there is a triply *transcendent* reality, or that there is a Divine reality, or simply that there is a spiritual reality. For each of these general propositions is logically equivalent to a large disjunction including among its disjuncts both a number of conjunctive propositions representing the claims of the various theistic traditions and a variety of non-theistic conjunctive alternatives representing other of the world's religious traditions. And of course there may well be disjuncts we haven't thought of yet, which inquirers of the far future will discuss. These various sets of detailed religious propositions represent different ways of *filling out* whatever is taken as the central religious idea. One of them, known or unknown, is true if that central idea is. Intellectually committed as they all are to the central idea, to this disjunction, and to filling out this disjunction as best they can, religious believers experiencing a disagreement of positions are at the same time deeply united. Recognizing that their central idea is the most profound, and that the present stage of its exploration is the earliest, following IH should lead them to find the residual disagreements entirely expectable and respectable, and should also generate optimism that a fuller unity may one day be achieved among people of good faith.

Find a better home for an emphasis on detailed beliefs

This recipe is in large part about looking at the same things differently. Nowhere is that more the case than in this final ingredient, which concerns validating the intensity of beliefs about details among the religious and the importance of sharing them with others, but changing one's view of

where this is appropriate. It is not appropriate, as we have seen, in intellectual discussion between believers and other believers with whom they disagree. In such discussion we should move from an emphasis on beliefs to one on positions. But it would perhaps be difficult to make this transition if no alternative place for the intensity of beliefs on details could be found that makes sense to the religious.The last ingredient involves finding that place.

The basic idea is that the natural and appropriate home for an emphasis on one's detailed beliefs is afforded by the contexts of worship and song and rituals or practices of various kinds that – as must be the case if they are *religious* contexts – engage the whole person and so also her emotions, celebrating and building on what may already have been seen rather than opening the individual or group involved to new discoveries. The experience of religious believing and also its unrestrained expression is closely tied to the profound emotion and practices aimed at wholeness that one finds in such contexts. If it appears, it would be a mistake to in any way seek to hold it back *here*, in the seeking or expression of spiritual unity within and among believers. This is where it belongs, as one part of a larger religious experience.

Now this better home for an emphasis on detailed beliefs – the beliefs that give to a particular religiousness its distinctive texture – is not a *new* home. What's new is the response to (IH & T) that leads us to restrict that emphasis to these quarters. Elsewhere, I have argued that a proper appreciation for our place in time and our immaturity might result in belief and its emphasis leaving the house of religion altogether. But my aim here is to show that, appealing to both T & IH, we can have a solution to the problem of religious disagreement without going as far as that. (Again, our solution is modest not radical!) If the influence of science continues, we should find T absorbed even by the conventionally religious before too long. And this, at least for those who also follow IH, should prevent for reasons already mentioned in previous sections what I will call the 'spillover effect' that we commonly see today. By this I mean the tendency indiscriminately to take the intellectual content of what is experienced as powerful, profound, and whole-making in the religious contexts mentioned above, together with the associated believing states, into *all* the contexts of life, including those of intellectual discussion with people whose religious experience has a different and indeed conflicting intellectual content. Coming at things, as it were, from the other side, we have already seen why belief endorsement should *in intellectual contexts* be restricted to the most important religious propositions, the most general and fundamental propositions, on which there is agreement, and of course this implies that in those same contexts detailed religious propositions should not receive endorsement. In adding this last ingredient of the recipe we are in effect answering the question whether they should not in any other context receive endorsement. My answer is no. A solution to the problem of religious disagreement can be had without going that far, and might indeed be difficult to defend or at least to realize in practical terms if we sought to go that far. It might even be argued that humility would come too close to diffidence if it went that far. The natural home for the expression of detailed beliefs is the religious home I have outlined. What (IH & T) clearly require is only that one avoid the spillover effect.

Conclusion

The various ingredients of the recipe having now been explained in connection with (IH & T), it may be helpful to have them set out in the manner of a recipe, so we can see the latter whole.

A Modest Solution to the Problem of Religious Disagreement

Notice the full breadth and texture of the propositional field
Notice the areas of agreement, previously hidden, that this exposes

Make a differential judgment of importance
Discriminate doxastically
Apply the concept of a position
Remove from 'disagreement' its negative connotations
Find a better home for an emphasis on detailed beliefs

Following some such recipe as this would seem to to be the very least that accepting a T-infused IH should motivate rational religious people to do in the face of the religious disagreements we find in the world today. Even if the thinkers of religious traditions were to accept some such proposal, we might make a start toward a world in which the problem of religious disagreement is solved both theoretically and practically.[ii]

ENDNOTES

[i] My own view continues to develop: I am presently working on a book to be called *The Humility of Reason: From Limits to Immaturities in Inquiry* in which I seek to identify the proper place of inquiry's temporal immaturity amid an array of other human immaturities.

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