

*An Argument for the Conceptual Incoherence of Mutualist  
Exclusivism*

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Self-described post-liberal thinkers such as Paul J. Griffiths (2001, 2007), and Jerome Gellman (2000) bid philosophers of religion to accept attitudes of religious exclusivism as just one among other aspects of religious particularity that persons reasonably adopt as part of a religious identity. This reasoning may seem initially plausible, but on closer inspection I think that the reasonableness of exclusivist responses to religious multiplicity falls apart.<sup>1</sup> There is no reason to support either the “full rationality” that Gellman wants us to credit contented religious exclusivists with, nor the reasonableness of the “polemical apologetics” which Griffiths bids the embrace of. I aim in this letter to undercut apologetic strategies which serve to support as Griffiths does in *An Apology for Apologetics*, a normalization of “inter-religious polemics.” Philosophers of religion I will argue ought not accept these over-broad claims, or confuse acknowledgement of reasonable disagreement between adherents of different worldview beliefs with relinquishing grounds for criticism of polemical exchanges among *theologically* intolerant sects or religions.

Starting from points made explicit by Griffiths, there are two ways to develop exclusivism. We will call them particularist, and mutualist. They have not been very well-marked in the literature, yet are distinct strategies for supporting one’s exclusivist response to religious multiplicity. Their differences become quite apparent by attention to the *language* that each employs, as Griffiths points out: All forms of salvific exclusivism hold that one religion alone is

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<sup>1</sup>Direct arguments against exclusivism might be thought of as supporting and complementing rejection of an over-broad intellectual right to remain “steadfast” in the face of serious peer disagreement, but I will leave the epistemology of disagreement to the side here. I elsewhere (Axtell 2019; 2020) argue for a risk-limited epistemic permissivism, in contrast to accounts defending blanket steadfastness, or impermissivist concessionism, equal-weight view, and principled agnosticism (the duty to suspend rather than “believe” faith-based teachings).

the gateway to salvation; all forms hold that religious value in God's eye is held exclusively by just *one* religion. But when we look closer we find exclusivism's scholarly defenders are not all making the same claim. Is the exclusivist saying that the adherents of only one of the world's religions are rational and responsible in claiming uniqueness, and in 'awarding themselves the prize,' as Karl Barth puts it? Or is the exclusivist saying 'I am rational and religiously virtuous in being an exclusivist of *my* home religion, and you are rational and religiously virtuous in being an exclusivist of *your* home religion'? *Any exclusivist must choose between these two claims.*

Griffiths terms the more traditional account "religion-specific exclusivism," and in what follows we will term it *particularist exclusivism*.<sup>2</sup> Most philosophers of religion would take Karl Barth and other evangelicals to be committed to particularist exclusivism. Particularist or religion-specific exclusivism is far and away the traditional sort. But in recent years it seems to have been largely supplanted, at least in journals of philosophical theology, by exclusivism developed along mutualist lines. Griffiths' books make an excellent study of this shift, and why he and others take it as an improvement over particularist exclusivism (even though evangelicals are often put off by it). This we will term *mutualist exclusivism*. The mutualist element of this defense of exclusivist attitudes is the concession that religious aliens *to us* are symmetrically granted an intellectual right to analogous exclusivist belief about *their* home religion. The mutualist sanctions the same exclusivist attitude to all those who are religious aliens to him or herself.

A particularist exclusivist, who says that only adherents of religion x are within their intellectual rights in making the exclusivist claim, will always use the *title* of that religion. In other words, who can rationally claim uniqueness and superiority is always a 'religion x-er,' where x does not change.<sup>3</sup> Particularist exclusivism is the most traditional, and is favored by evangelicals. By contrast, the mutualist defense of exclusivism by such authors as Paul Griffiths, Jerome Gellman and Margalit is developed without reference to a single, named religion, but instead using the *formal* terms of "home" and "alien." I call them *formal* terms because they act as placeholders. Each mutualist author of course is personally an adherent of one particular faith (Gellman and Margalit are both Jewish, while Griffiths and De Ridder

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<sup>2</sup>Steve Clarke (2012) refers to the particularist orientation of evangelicals and similar groups as *interventionist exclusivism*: when a group aims for conversion of non-believers by love or by force. In clear contrast, mutualist exclusivism is non-traditional; it prescribes a live and let die response rather than evangelicism, and would not, for example, have been by the authors of *The Fundamentals* (1910-1915).

<sup>3</sup>This is the case for Christians like Karl Barth, George Lindbeck and very many more. Plantinga (1995) I suspect would come down on the side of particularist exclusivism since warrant or reliability, unlike internalist justification, cannot be true of incompatible beliefs. But his ambiguity in defending exclusivism, I elsewhere argue, is a reason why the "Great Pumpkin" objections are serious objections to his account of proper basicity.

(2014) are Christian). Yet the *thesis* of exclusivism as they all develop it is a formal one which brings indexicality with it, since an adherent of religion a will be an alien to adherents of religion b, c, d, etc., and these others will be religious aliens to adherents of religion a. Their mutualist arguments defend the rationality of the exclusivist attitude *generally, meaning for each against the others*.

I want to argue that an apologetic strategy to defend religious exclusivism along mutualist lines is deeply in tension with itself. The logical coherence of mutualist exclusivism can be called into question even apart from more specific concerns regarding its epistemological, moral, and theological adequacy. The mutualist exclusivist's core negative claim, that no religion based on constitutive, redemptive, and revealed truths can ascribe value to the religious lives of religious others (Margalit), is in danger of being recognized as what Aristotle termed "sophistic refutations: "what appear to be refutations but are really fallacies instead."<sup>4</sup>

First, let's get our definitions clarified. Griffiths defines salvific inclusivism in a formal and hence non-religion-specific way. "Exclusivism...makes belonging to the home religion essential for salvation," while inclusivism says that "belonging to the home religion is not necessary for salvation, that belonging to an alien religion may suffice..."<sup>5</sup> While of course there are numerous soteriologies and many ways to combine theological ideas, Griffiths manner of defining the relationship between salvific exclusivism and inclusivism formally seems quite practical and intuitive: inclusivism is the denial of exclusivism. So I amend Griffiths' terms only minimally in what follows.

Griffiths' position that I am calling mutualism defends not just Christian exclusivism, but "structurally similar forms of religion-specific exclusivism." Mutualist exclusivism we can therefore define as asserting the reasonableness of adherents of a plurality of faith traditions in taking a salvific exclusivist response to religious multiplicity. We know what the exclusivist thinks about the falsity of their belief and their status as unsaved. But what is the exclusivist saying about their *reasonableness*? The mutualist as we have seen, defends it. Mutualism is intended to show proper awareness that judging another religion solely by the criteria and standards of one's own tradition is a highly problematic exercise. Mutualism must imply some positive moral and/or epistemological commitments, and we have seen those expressed

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<sup>4</sup>"This happens with arguments, as also elsewhere, through a certain likeness between the genuine and the sham." Aristotle, *On Sophistical Refutations*, 164a20.

<sup>5</sup>Griffiths 2001, 159. Note that for clarity's sake we will also follow Griffiths in constructing our argument to target only *salvific* exclusivism, setting aside what additional complications there would be if we focused on or tried to include *doctrinal* exclusivism. This is also a distinction Griffiths acknowledges, and interestingly he finds doctrinal exclusivism a largely untenable thesis for logical reasons of the over-lapping of worldviews. Yet he insists that this untenability does not extend to salvific exclusivisms, with their focus on religious value rather than truth. Our argument suggests otherwise: *both* forms of religious exclusivism are untenable.

in philosophical terms of the “rationality” of the agent. I will use the broader term “reasonable.” To add some specificity, let’s understand mutualist ethics/epistemology as acceptance of (IGR), John Hick’s much discussed Intellectual Golden Rule (IGR) “a rule of granting to others a premise which we rely on ourselves....”: that our own experiences and those of the religion-founders are veridical, and that our tradition’s transmission and instruction through elders is sincere.<sup>6</sup> The denial of mutualism, defined in this formal way of acceptance of such a dialogical/epistemic rule, would be particularism, though we do not need that term here. Concern about self-consistency in the mutualist account is perhaps the result of post-modern, or again ‘Hickean’ elements that postliberal theology has tried to use to its advantage, but which on closer inspection is consistent only with the rejection of religious exclusivism, but not with its affirmation. Let’s be still more specific about these elements that set mutualism apart from particularism. The difference between particularist and mutualist exclusivisms can be put in terms of Christopher Adamo’s elaboration of Lessing through what John Hick termed the Intellectual Golden Rule (IGR), a rule of granting to others a premise which we rely on ourselves:

(IGR) If it is rational to trust my own experiences as veridical and my elders as sincere, provided I am open to defeating conditions, I must grant that it is rational for others to trust the veridicality of their experiences and the sincerity of their elders.<sup>7</sup>

Mutualist ethics /epistemology can’t just be saying, yes, you are both pious and reasonable, but you simply are not my epistemic peer because your religion is false. The mutualist claim *says* something: It commits the mutualist to the *rationality* or *reasonableness* of a person’s exclusivist attitude, whatever home religion she hails from. While I don’t agree with that claim, I do agree with mutualist ethics / epistemology. What mutualistic epistemics commits one to that the mutualist but not the particularist accepts, can remain a matter of debate. (IGR) may only approximate this commitment, but the point in bringing it up is that mutualist epistemics cannot just be the empty claim of D’Costa, that I can use my earlier beliefs to judge false any claims that don’t conform to them (I elsewhere call these “biased closure

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<sup>6</sup>Hick, *The Interpretation of Religion*, 2nd ed., 235. Hick continues, “Let us avoid the implausibly arbitrary dogma that religious experience is all delusory except with the single exception of the particular form enjoyed by the one who is speaking.”

<sup>7</sup>Hick is a highly influential philosophical theologian, and Griffiths and other mutualist exclusivists I interpret as trying to accommodate this Golden Rule by conceding to John Hick that those who experience the world religiously cannot “reasonably claim that our own form of religious experience, together with that of the tradition of which we are a part, is veridical whilst the others are not” (235). But whatever the specific motives for their turn to mutualist defenses, the denial of IGR is closely associated with particularist exclusivism.

inferences”, and connect this with religious absolutism, in contrast to universalism).<sup>8</sup> Another way to put this is that in particularist exclusivism, truth and justification are both rare, because these go together and are the basis for God’s just condemnation of unbelievers; but on mutualist exclusivism truth is still rare, but justification or rationality broadly available.

With these definitions in place for salvific inclusivism as the denial of salvific exclusivism, and for particularist ethics / epistemology as the denial of mutualism (and more specifically of (IGR), I now argue:

1. Mutualism implies the reasonableness of religious aliens in maintaining belief in their home faith tradition even after exposure to ours.
2. The reasonableness of religious aliens in maintaining belief in their home faith tradition even after exposure to ours implies the reasonableness of any one person’s non-belief in any other person’s home faith tradition.
3. A just creator’s final judgment of a person’s religious value would not devalue transcendently false but reasonable belief or non-belief in any one person’s home faith tradition.
4. If a just creator’s final judgment of a person’s religious value does not devalue trait x, then it allows for the value (actually or at least potentially) of trait x.
5. So by 1-4, a just creator’s final judgment of a person’s religious value allows for the religious value (actually or at least potentially) of religious aliens with the trait of reasonably maintaining belief in their home faith tradition even after exposure to ours.
6. (5) is the thesis of salvific inclusivism, and the denial of salvific exclusivism.
7. Therefore, by 1-6, mutualist salvific exclusivism implies its own negation.
8. Therefore, by 1-7, mutualism is logically inconsistent with religious exclusivism.

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<sup>8</sup>What mutualism commits a person to is crucial to notice. (IGR) is very much in the spirit of Gotthold Lessing’s famous parable of the rings in *Nathan the Wise*, though as we have seen that story is open to varying interpretations. Those theists who allow (IGR) would seem to be granting that adherents of different revealed religions stand equally vulnerable in relation to Lessing’s “ugly, broad ditch,” and can be equally sincere in their religious identity. So mutualist ethics / epistemics and acceptance of (IGR) seem to me closely linked, and particularist ethics / epistemics with denial of (IGR). For further discussion of the tendencies of fundamentalists to reduce religious contrariety to a simplistic “bivalent” relationship between (absolute) truth and falsehood, see Grube (2005), and Grube and Van Herck. (eds.) (2018).

The potential religious value of religious others is the thesis of salvific inclusivism, and at the same time the denial of salvific exclusivism. (1) and (2) seems to me straightforward applications of the mutualist thesis, and indeed they reflect the key difference between religious particularists and mutualists, that mutualist guidance does not ask you to convert to my religion, but instead says to stay within your own home religion, as where God intends you to be. (3) would seem to be the most debatable premise, but its denial would seem to me to imply that God judges us not for sincere worship or moral virtue or intellectual reasonableness, or for anything but assent to what theological system is transcendentally true. The more that the human epistemic condition is religiously ambiguous, the more that this external success is far beyond anyone's control. Premise (3) is certainly debatable and I look forward to hearing responses to it, but I would argue that it is only deniable on a soteriology which aggravates problems of religious luck.

In summary, mutualist exclusivism was supposed to be how post-liberal theologians respond to the Enlightenment challenge, and also to 19th century liberal theology and 20th century post-modernism. And it was supposed to move post-liberal theology beyond them rather than simply denying them without a *positive* apologetic to plausibly explain what makes their denial reasonable.<sup>9</sup> Our conclusion that mutualist ethics / epistemology is logically inconsistent with religious exclusivism would be significant, if the argument holds, because it would mean that this purported improvement simply does not hold water: a mutualist apologetic for exclusivism collapses back into the particularist doctrine it started out repudiating as small-minded and rationally unsustainable. The hope for a positive apologetic along mutualist lines collapses back into more purely negative religious apologetics. Exclusivism is inconsistent with mutualist ethics / epistemics, so mutualist exclusivism lacks conceptual coherence. Exclusivist apologetics cast in its terms do not escape worries about implicit relativism and overt appeal to religious luck in the older particularist or singly-rational defense. It has not built a better defense of the reasonableness of an exclusivist response to religious multiplicity.

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<sup>9</sup>My use of the term "mutualism" is formal and thus quite different than Paul Knitter's. But another way to put the question is, "How one can assent to *moral / epistemic* mutualism, yet not go on to endorse *religious* mutualism in any one of Knitter's (2004) multiple senses? How can religious value be so different from moral and epistemic value, that one can resist this further endorsement, and an inclusivist rather than exclusivist response to religious multiplicity?"

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