



Restored Epistemology: A Communicative Pluralist Answer to Religious Diversity

by Dennis Potter

The problem of diversity has both propositional and practical components. There are many different religious traditions. The claims of these various traditions are often mutually exclusive. They cannot all express the truth about ultimate reality. Moreover, it appears that they cannot all be ways to fulfill the purpose of human life. For example, Christian salvation is very different from Buddhist enlightenment. The existence of different claims about ultimate reality and different paths to fulfill our lives' purpose is *the problem of diversity*.

Latter-day Saints claim that they belong to the one true church. By this, they often mean that there is more truth expressed by the texts, leaders, and members of the LDS Church than that expressed by any other religious tradition. But they also often mean that there is no way to fulfill the purpose of this life other than through the LDS Church. These claims are related. One appears to be a claim about the propositions expressed in Mormon theology. The other is a claim about the most appropriate life for a human being. Both are essential to the way Latter-day Saints understand their religion. I will call these doctrines *propositional* and *practical exclusivism* (respectively); together they constitute the current LDS answer to the problem of diversity.

In this paper, I want to make a philosophical argument against exclusivism and then proceed to offer an answer to the problem of diversity that is not exclusivist. However, the view that I will offer is also not pluralist in the sense advocated by John Hick.¹ That is, I reject the idea that there is a transcendent reality about which we can know nothing substantive and yet is the ground of all our religious traditions. Also, exclusivism and pluralism both assume that the propositional aspect of exclusivism is fundamental. I don't.

Instead, I argue that we need a "communicative pluralist" answer to the problem of diversity. There are several parts to this communicative pluralism. First, the propositional aspect of exclusivism encourages us to believe that persons do and should act based on the propositional contents of their beliefs. This view of the relationship between rational belief and action is flawed. People more often act based on non-doxastic bodily and mental affects than they do based on theoretical postulates about the world. The network of affect is more responsible for the production of religious faith and practice than its propositional component. Second, it is commonly assumed that the propositional content of a religious tradition is a fixed set of doctrines that give us, once and for all, the truths necessary for salvation. If affective interaction with deity and others in community is what matters then the propositional content of a religious tradition can be dynamic. In fact, it must be dynamic in order to better satisfy the type of affective tension that is productive of the relationship with the divine. Third, this doctrinal dynamism opens up the possibility for a real communicative interaction with those of other faiths – i.e., one in which we do not assume a privileged position. We follow, in the words of Imre Lakatos, a "method of proofs and refutations" in our interaction with those of other faiths: all "counterexamples" are entertained as legitimate contributions to the dialogue.² The revisions of the doctrinal components of our faith come from this communicative interaction.

The central problem with propositional exclusivism is its epistemological hubris. This hubris is harder to see from an externalist standpoint than from an internalist standpoint. The difference between internalism and externalism is how warrant, i.e., the collection of events that produce knowledge for a subject, is understood. According to the internalist, the events that produce knowledge for a subject must be restricted to events

within conscious access of the subject.³ From an internalist standpoint, Mormons do not have conscious access to anything that puts them in a position of epistemic privilege. People of other religious faiths have religious experiences that bear witness that they are correct as well! Internally, there is no *epistemic* difference between being Mormon and being Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, or what have you. Therefore, there is no privileged ground on which to base the claim of exclusivism. If so, then propositional exclusivism manifests epistemological pride: unfounded confidence in one's beliefs.

From an externalist perspective, things are different. The epistemic privilege enjoyed by Mormons could be *that the Holy Ghost is indeed the origin of their experience*, even if they do not have conscious access to this fact. However, this epistemic privilege seems unimportant⁴ as soon as Mormons encounter religious diversity in the world. The reason for this is that when we are dealing with propositional questions of great moral importance we must make sure that we are correct. The presence of persons who bear witness to a different truth is a reason to question our own witness. Such an encounter should be the start of a dialogue. This is especially true when we see the reinforcing^v role played by religion in violent conflict.

From an externalist perspective, we can have knowledge without having the knowledge of how we know. But this unexamined status of first-order knowledge can only persist while we lie in epistemological innocence. Once we are faced with epistemological conflict we are forced out of the first-order garden into the world of second-order epistemic conflict. This epistemic "fall" up to second-order concerns comes because we must ask the question as to who is right. The externalist can give no answer; but the exclusivist must. Each of the agents involved in the conflict of religious belief has no recourse but to return to her faith tradition to buttress her claims. Indeed, there can be no common ground for discussion.

As the Reformation was an important corrective on the excesses of institutional Catholicism, externalism was an important corrective on the excessive rationalism and skepticism of internalism. The problem with internalism is this: if justification is entirely a matter of our internal states, and if those can be exactly as they are while the world is entirely

different than it appears to us in our internal perceptual states, then it seems that internalism has a difficult time avoiding skepticism. Externalism avoids this problem by avoiding the demand that the knower do all the work in producing knowledge. This is one reason it is appropriate to refer to the Christian variety of externalism as Reformed Epistemology. However, in my view, externalism spells an end to the epistemological project. The Reformation and externalism both push the epistemology of faith out of the public domain. The externalist's privatization of the economy of epistemology is not a better way of doing epistemology; it's a way of not doing epistemology at all. This is true if we understand the epistemology from its inside. Inside epistemology it is a methodological project: what can we do to come to possess knowledge about the world? However, externalism sees epistemology from the outside. Epistemology is reified in the metaphysical question, "what is warrant?" And it accepts an answer that tells us nothing about what we can do. Instead, it leaves the epistemological project in the hands of *what happens to be the truth*: if the Holy Ghost is *in fact* the reason for our experiences then we *do* know what we think we know. Our epistemological status is no longer up to us. The project is out of our hands.

The epistemological hubris mentioned above is manifested, not in the fact that we stick to our doxastic guns despite encountering diversity, but in the fact that the privatization of religious faith prevents real public dialogue.⁶ Exclusivism, on the externalist's epistemology, leads either to evangelical imperialism (based on an elusive and transcendent privileged epistemic status) or to evangelical isolationism. I can have nothing to say to someone who insists that God talks to them and not to me, despite my profound religious experiences. Ultimately, those of other faiths must become one of *us* or must remain one of *them*. On the exclusivist and externalist view, there is no true public square of faith discourse: there is dialogue on *our* terms or not at all.

When epistemology is externalist, the exclusivist claim serves to divide a community along lines of religious ideology. This is not to say that *we* are not in material contact with *them*. *We* work, play, learn and live all aspects of our lives with *them*. *We* are the epitome of political correctness and tolerance in the "vener space" of work, school and play. (To say that this is "a vener space" is to say that it is a life in which we present a

façade of ourselves to others.) But the possibility of community with *them*, behind the veneer of tolerance, is precluded by *our* exclusivism. Discourse about anything and everything of importance to *us* is necessary for real community. Polite silence hides true division: the true division that *is* pride.

The exclusivist might counter that she can have real dialogue with her “friends” and yet continue to believe that she is right. Indeed, we rightly and necessarily do this with regard to many of our non-religious beliefs. But my contention is that exclusivism, on the externalist view, is more than the claim that *we* are right and *they* are wrong. It is the claim that *we* have a privileged and transcendent epistemic status, not open to any tool of public investigation. In other words, externalist exclusivism is gnostic. When I have the memory that the car is parked in section C and you have the memory that it’s in section D, we can submit these claims to the public square of verification. Externalism says that we can’t do this with religious belief.

To counter the problems associated with an exclusivist and externalist approach, we need more than a reformation of epistemology; we need a *restoration* of epistemology. The restoration of epistemology is based on the ideas that (i) there is no end to revelation from God, (ii) “by proving contraries truth is made manifest,”⁷ and (iii) a seed of doctrine must be put to experimental (and hence public) tests.

If there is continuing revelation, then it is possible that we can be wrong in the way in which we have interpreted past revelation. Perhaps it implies that we can always be wrong about past revelation itself. This is because the distinction between the interpretation of past revelation and *what* the revelation is itself is problematized by the flexibility of meaning in human language. So, it would seem that fallibilism is the inevitable upshot of continuing revelation. This is the view in which we recognize that any of our beliefs might be false and those who disagree with us might be right. This view allows us to have true dialogue with others, i.e. wherein we really entertain the possibility of their being correct.

Next, what we should try to do is not find the truth in a cumulative way. Instead, we should prove contraries, i.e., we should use the method of proofs and refutations. This method entails that we should try to prove a doctrine as well as refute it. And this is true of any of the defini-

tions or postulates that we incorporate into our proofs and refutations. Thus, the historical process of reasoning that results is by its nature never-ending. So, our noetic structure is not foundationalist (like a building), nor coherentist (like a web). It is more like the search for the most fundamental physical objects. We always find that what we thought was most fundamental could be broken down further. This is what happens in thought as well. What we think is most fundamental can always be decomposed and modified further.

To clarify this let's think of one of the most traditional problems of epistemology: *the infinite regress problem*. The problem here comes from two assumptions: (i) every belief must be justified and (ii) justifications consist of arguments composed of beliefs. This leads to an infinite regress. So, epistemologists try to question (i) or (ii). But why not just admit that there could be an infinite regress? The main reason is that we think of justifications as something that we have before we are permitted to have the belief, i.e., something on which the belief is grounded. But if we lose this conception of justification, and realize that a justification is a historical response to a query on the part of someone who disagrees, then we can admit that the justification can come "after" the belief so to speak. If so, then it is not a problem that the request for further justification be potentially infinite in its structure. The infinite regress is only a problem if every belief must be grounded before it is challenged.

The third part of restored epistemology is that theory follows action (by this I do not mean "common theoretical practice"). We are primarily actors in a world and this is what matters to God.⁸ Indeed, the occasion for theory is always worldly. Theory affects us and our environment. We choose to coordinate our theoretical propositions with certain worldly events. These coordinations can be more or less useful. Propositional knowledge of the world is secondary to affective knowledge. I know *how* to do *X* long before I know that *X* is such and such. Linguistic meaning itself must be determined by linguistic use, if we are to explain how we learn language. But we are already actors before we are speakers. We communicate affectively. If so, then linguistic meaning arises from coordinating affects in certain ways. The upshot is that propositional knowledge is ultimately an aspect of practical/affective knowledge and not the other way around.

It is clear that a doxastic practice that is dynamic, in constant tension, and primarily rooted in practical life is one that must be produced and maintained publicly. This allows that the vibrancy of our own religious perspective is increased by true public dialogue. It doesn't rely on a transcendent feature of Ultimate Reality to justify taking others seriously. The features of our practice themselves immanently lead to a communicative pluralism.

One objection to this very rough sketch of communicative pluralism may be that the important part of religious faith is propositional: what I believe is true and therefore what those beliefs tell me to do will bring salvation. On the contrary, I have argued above that religious faith, like every other aspect of our lives, is primarily *affective*. Linguistic discourse is just one type of bodily affect. And only in linguistic discourse does affect become propositional.⁹

Suppose that beliefs about theological reality are necessary for salvation. It follows that most are not saved because they are not "smart" enough. If the propositional view of religious faith is right, then there will be a final exam and most will fail. Moreover, most Mormons don't have the correct view of the nature of God. I don't say this because I think that I have the correct view. But I say this because of the differences in the logical implications about the views that most Mormons have. They cannot all be correct. If any of them are right, then most of them are wrong. And this doxastic indeterminism infects the most basic of doctrines as well. What is atonement, faith, repentance, baptism, and priesthood authority? The claims about these most basic "doctrines" are the loci of competing interpretations. Which among the various competing interpretations is correct?

This observation is not uniquely applicable to Mormonism. Christianity can be seen as defined by the increasingly precise doctrines it advocates in the creeds. But these creeds are the result of a process of excluding competing interpretations. In this way, Christianity is defined as much by its heresy as by its orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is a result not a beginning. Today this battle for Christian identity continues in the guise of the fight between mainline liberalism and evangelical conservatism over social issues such as the ordination of women, gays, and lesbians.

We now see that the problem of diversity is not just a problem for

inter-religious dialogue. It is a problem for *intra*-religious dialogue. In this way, it leads to a question about the ontological identity of a religion. What *is* Mormonism if there are competing interpretations of its most basic doctrines? The answer is that most religions are not defined by their doctrines. Instead, they can be defined by the tension that obtains in doctrinal disputes. Or, more generally, they can be defined by the tension inherent in certain types of affective interaction.

Defining affect is a difficult task. It is the subject of another paper. Herein it will suffice to give examples and gesture in the direction of affect's nature. The ways our experiences appear to us (i.e., "qualia") are affects. For example, there is something that it is like to see red. But subjective qualities are not the only affects. Bodily reactions are often affects. The expert mountain biker doesn't think about his line through the rocks on the trail, but his body "knows" where to go. "Body language", tone, mood, attitude, emotive response, and even "cool-ness" are all affects. Affective knowledge is the knowledge of how to control, change, or produce affects in one's self or others. Advertisers are affective experts.

Affect is at the core of how we produce relationships with other human beings. Similarly, affect is at the core of how we produce a relationship with God, or how God produces a relationship with us. The effect of the Holy Ghost on us is primarily affective. Responding to this relationship to which God calls us is what matters. The production of affective relations involves the knowledge of the appropriateness of certain affective reactions. Different religious practices produce different networks of affective relations. Contrast a Mormon testimony meeting with a charismatic Christian revival. Unlike propositional knowledge, which must avoid contradiction, affective knowledge can be in a state of fundamental tension. The tension of affective interplay is the nature of a religious practice.

Indeed, Mormonism is not a unified system of doctrines or even a system of affective relations acting in functional harmony. It is the site of competition over meanings, narratives, and interpretations. For example, there is a competition over whether God's embodiment means that God can also be infinite. Or, for example, Orson Pratt and Brigham Young famously argued about whether God progresses in knowledge. And, more mundanely, Mormons commonly dispute about whether tithing is

on the gross or net income.

Sometimes these competitions over the meanings of our narratives and traditions are analogous to the way inter-religious dialogue proceeds after the adoption of communicative pluralism. We come to each other as equals pursuing enlightening dialogue. This means that there is no assumption of authority or special knowledge on the part of either interlocutor. However, sometimes disputes over doctrine are the ideological site of a broader power struggle. Persons in positions of power employ doctrines as strategies of control. Persons outside of the locus of power employ doctrines as strategies of resistance to control. When this occurs, the point about communicative pluralism becomes even more important. A position of religious authority within a community is not necessarily a position of epistemic privilege. Indeed, religious authority may be interpreted as institutional authority and not epistemic authority. Such different notions of authority can be related, but need not be. If my arguments about communicative pluralism above are correct, then they apply within a religious tradition just as much as they do outside a religious tradition. And so, doctrinal power struggles must be conducted in the egalitarian way indicated by communicative pluralism—call it “epistemic democracy.”

It is the (sometimes) competition between the center of institutional power and the margins that differentiates intra-religious diversity from inter-religious diversity in a pluralistic society. Communicative inter-religious dialogue and affective interaction *may* occur in a pluralistic society. If so, then the dialogue is not fundamentally hierarchical, but rather democratic. A discourse located in a site of hierarchical¹⁰ competition will tend to undermine true relationships. This is because at the heart of a true relationship is love and love must be given freely, without coercion, by both sides involved. And since a community of co-equal gods is our goal, the hierarchical epistemic competition within Mormonism is detrimental to community.¹¹ This is why inter-religious dialogue is absolutely essential for the production of community. Thus, from the communicative pluralist point of view, both inter-religious *and* intra-religious dialogues are subject to the same democratic epistemic ethos. There should be no assumption of special epistemic privilege even by those who have ecclesiastical power and influence.

CONCLUSION

The mandate to engage in inter-religious dialogue is not based on any transcendental claim about the equal validity of all religions. Communicative pluralism is immanent pluralism. Our pluralism is based on commitments within *our* community that should be developed in the direction of epistemological humility. We have our own religious tradition and practice. We don't have to give these up to enter into a true community with those outside our faith traditions. As we build communities with those outside our institution, we build new dynamic networks of affect and dialogue. The division perpetuated by the hierarchical tension in the LDS practice can be replaced with a liberating unity created by an egalitarian tension in a community that proves contraries and manifests truth. The love of God is the love of the "least of these" and theological discourse is just one way to begin to engage in loving relations with others.

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NOTES

¹ See, for example, the pluralism offered in John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, CN; Yale University Press, 1992).

² Imre Lakatos, *Proofs and Refutations: The Logic of Mathematical Discovery* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976).

³ For further discussion of the difference between internalism and externalism, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴ In fact, one may argue that not only does this privileged status seem unimportant in the face of diversity, but that it wanes when we confront something different from our cherished beliefs.

⁵ Religion reinforces conflicts whose ultimate cause is not religious. Witness the conflict in the north of Ireland.

⁶ In the sense used herein, evangelism is not public dialogue.

⁷ Joseph Smith to Daniel Rupp in 1844, quoted in Eugene England, *Dialogues with Myself* (Salt Lake City: Orion, 1984), ix.

⁸ Matthew 22: 37-9 claims that loving God and neighbor are the greatest commandments. As long as love is an action (as it clearly seems to be in this case), then action would seem to be most fundamental.

⁹ It makes one wonder if there could be a theory of meaning that grounds

meaning in affective interaction. It is my suspicion that there could be such a theory, but this must be the subject of another paper.

¹⁰ That is, competition wherein there is an asymmetry of power.

¹¹ See Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Co., 1979), 342-62.