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The Right to Believe that only one Religion is True

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Some philosophers claim to show that religious diversity should lead rational beings to find some conciliation between them. They say that diversity should mean that no one could pretend to hold the truth. We must therefore renounce alethic exclusivity, the claim that a certain religion possesses by itself the truth. This encourages religious scepticism, because when well-informed and reasonable people disagree about their religious or anti-religious beliefs, their confidence in the justification of their beliefs must be reduced or diminished – even if that belief were true – to the point that these people are intellectually reconciled. Let us call this claim the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation. I will first claim that it is not a sound principle of intellectual ethics. For that, I will first show that if this Principle claims to sceptically conclude to the plurality of religions, it is, in reality, a reasoning from a sceptical dogma, and not only a reasoning that leads to scepticism. I mean that it is a hidden atheistic argument disguised as an honest neutral reasoning. As it calls for an ethical requirement of rationality, without being then so transparent that it seems, it is important to show that this Principle borders on deception. I am secondly going to show that, even if one accepts to allow oneself to be conciliated by reasoning, the Principle has serious flaws, especially with regard to the philosophical psychology of religious faith. My conclusion will be that it is wrong that we should suspend any religious belief that an alleged epistemic peer does not share as soon as we become aware that he does not share it. It is not true that it is rational in any case to respect the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation, and that another attitude would always be irrational and morally disgusting.

Keywords: Religious pluralism, conciliationism, doctrinal exclusivism, religious exclusivism, faith, religious scepticism, intellectual arrogance, intellectual virtue.

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Introduction

Some philosophers claim to show that religious diversity should lead rational beings to find some conciliation between them. They say that diversity should mean that no one could pretend to hold the truth. We must therefore renounce alethic exclusivism, the claim that a certain religion possesses by itself the truth. This encourages religious scepticism, because when well-informed and reasonable people disagree about their religious or anti-religious beliefs, their confidence in the justification of their beliefs must be reduced or diminished – even if that belief were true – to the point that these people are intellectually reconciled. Let us call this claim the *Principle of Intellectual Conciliation*.

According to this Principle, conciliation between believers of the various religions would thus be a requirement of intellectual ethics. To follow this principle makes us intellectually honest. We do not preserve beliefs (including religious ones) against our right to have them. The contrary is the culpable intellectual arrogance of those who claim to be right against people who disagree with them, but are as well informed and reasonable as they are. To follow the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation would also be an assurance of civil peace in our multicultural societies. It helps to ensure harmonious coexistence between believers and unbelievers, and between believers of different religions. If there is conciliation, there is peace! Thus, the two ideals of an honest intellectual life and of social peace would imply a drastic reduction of confidence in the justification of our religious beliefs or of our anti-religious beliefs.

Yet my intention is to challenge the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation[1]. I will first claim that it is not a sound principle of intellectual ethics. For that, I will first show that if this Principle claims to sceptically conclude to the plurality of religions, it is, in reality, a reasoning *from* a sceptical dogma, and not only a reasoning that leads to scepticism. I mean that it is a hidden atheistic argument disguised as an honest neutral reasoning. As it calls for an ethical requirement of rationality, without being then so transparent that it seems, it is important to show that this Principle borders on deception. I am secondly going to show that, even if one accepts the argument as it is, the Principle has serious flaws, especially with regard to the philosophical psychology of religious faith.

The principle of conciliation as a reformulation of Agrippa's first mode

To explain what is (perhaps secretly) the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation, consider the following reasoning:

1. *X* believes that *p*.
2. *Y* believes that *q*.

[1] I already defended religious exclusivism in [Pouivet, 2013]. I am here seeking to complete my argument and to defend it against the conciliationist strategy.

3. *p* and *q* are apparently incompatible[2].
4. If *X* was in *Y*'s situation, it is very likely that *X* would believe *q,* and that he would think *p* is wrong[3].
5. If *Y* was in *X*'s situation, it is very likely that *Y* would believe that *p,* and that he would think *q* is false.
6. It is intellectually compulsory to doubt *p* and *q*.

Such an argument asserts that if *p* and *q* are incompatible religious beliefs (or that *p* is a religious belief and *q* an anti-religious belief), then one is necessarily led to doubt about *p* and *q*. In this argument, (4) and (5) correspond to the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation. It is an argument from religious disagreement to religious scepticism for equally intelligent people, of good faith and intellectually honest. (Exactly the kind of people we are, of course).

Consequently, it is hardly surprising that the previous argument has a sceptical conclusion, since it is an application to religious belief of one of the five modes of Agrippa, as described by Sextus Empiricus in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* [Sextus Empiricus, 2000, p. 40–41]. Yet, these modes of Agrippa are indeed much *formulations* of scepticism than arguments in favour of scepticism.

The first mode of Agrippa, and the main one, is precisely the disagreement of opinions. It has this structure:

(A) *S1* believes that *p*.
(B) *S2* believes that not *p*.
(C) At most, one of them is right.
(D) The disagreement between *S1* and *S2* cannot be resolved.
(E) We must suspend judgment on *p*.

It is the disagreement itself that is supposed to induce the suspension of judgment. Assume that (D) is disputed, that is, that the disagreement cannot be resolved. Then, to justify *p* or not *p,* it would be necessary *to give* in favour of one or the other a reason *r1*. But it can in turn be challenged, according to the same argument as the previous one. Then another reason *r2* is needed. But the argument applied to *r1* applies also to *r2,* and another reason *r3* is needed. Hence, there is an infinite regression (second mode of Agrippa). The reason proposed will ultimately remain relative to the one who gives it (third mode); or it is hardly a hypothesis (fourth mode); or else it supposes other reasons which are, taken together, circular (fifth mode), because one of them, the first, serves to found others of which one is used to found the first – which takes us around and around in circles. Therefore, the disagreement, that is to say (D), subsists. Finally we should then suspend the judgment (E).

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[2] Let us say that p and q could be one of these propositions: God exists/God does not exist; there is only one God/There are multiple gods; God is one and triune/God is absolutely one; Jesus is the Son of God/Jesus is an admirable man; Jesus died on the Cross and rose/If even Jesus died on the Cross, he never rose; The Virgin Mary has an immaculate conception/The Virgin Mary is tainted by Original sin; The Bible says the truth/Vedic texts tell the truth; the Bible does not say the truth.

[3] It would be possible to contest that one could know what someone would think in a situation where he would be (in a counterfactual situation therefore). But this is to explain the reasoning of those who defend the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation, and not to accept the premises of this reasoning.

Whoever uses the logical form of Agrippa's first mode to reason about the diversity of religions knows very well what will happen: he will conclude sceptically. It is with any disagreement we come to this conclusion: it is not at all peculiar to religious disagreements, but to disagreements in general. And it makes no doubt that the initial argument about religious disagreements at the beginning of this paper is simply a reformulation of Agrippa's first mode with religious premises simply added. (4) specifies (D): it gives a reason why some disagreement about religious beliefs cannot be resolved. This reason is presented as the epistemic substitutability of the opponents. If *X*, a Christian, was in the intellectual position of *Y*, a Muslim, it is very likely that *X* would not believe that God is one and triune, and that *X* would even think that it is false. (A person's intellectual situation refers to the context of his belief). The argument is not deterministic: it does not signify that the social context of belief directly determines belief. The argument claims simply the complete epistemic substitutability of *X*, a Christian, and *Y*, a Muslim. This substitutability leads to the relativity of beliefs and it encourages the suspension of such beliefs. And this argument has an ethical meaning: the one who understands the argument cannot maintain a right to believe against other's beliefs.

It seems to me that using such a reasoning to conclude sceptically about religious beliefs is like to ask a fox to take care of the hens: if you formulate this way the problem of religious disagreement, you already know what will result. You don't conclude in favour of religious scepticism from apparently non-sceptical premises, because this way to reason makes you already a latent sceptic. How convincing is it to use a typically sceptical argument to defend a sceptical religious conclusion? And then, how to believe that religious scepticism has been promoted in such an argument otherwise than by presupposing it in the choice of such an argument form? If the disagreements were about the good taste of a Bordeaux wine, or about the choice of Prague as a vacation destination, with the same kind of sceptical argument, the conclusion would also be sceptical!

My intention now is to show that, in the case of religious beliefs[4], resort to this sceptical argument is simply a way of disguising a *sophism* that is contained in the premises (4) and (5). This sophism is located in the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation itself.

The true nature of religious belief

In a disagreement about the truth of a proposition *p,* it is said by the conciliationists, if there is an epistemic symmetry between the protagonists, they are irrational in maintaining their belief that *p* or their belief that not *p*; or, at least, they are irrational if they do not loose their trust in the truth of *p* or not *p*; or even if they do not suspend their beliefs that *p* or not *p*. The epistemic symmetry supposes that each of the protagonists possesses the same data (evidences), and the same capacities; none of them is intellectually limited, of bad faith, debauched, malicious, dishonest, and so on. There is this way

[4] I don't pretend to refute the first mode of Agrippa by itself but to contest its application to religious disagreements, or more precisely to contest that by itself its constitutes an argument in favour of the Principle of Conciliation.

an intellectual *parity* between them. What must be recognized in (4) is this parity: neither is better placed than the other to know if *p* is right or if *q* (not *p*) is right.

Thus, conciliationists say that it would be irrational not to be conciliatory in a religious disagreement between peers. That is to say, it would be irrational not to suspend one's belief, for example, the belief in the Trinity or, on the contrary, the belief in unitarianism. Disagreement testifies finally to the irrationality of the protagonists, and agreement in scepticism is the only way to recover rationality. Irrationality in religious disagreement manifests itself in intellectual arrogance: *S* is intellectually arrogant if he considers that his belief should have to be considered as true even by those who have no way of knowing that it is true. And the diagnosis of arrogance introduces the moral, and in fact immoral, character of the non-concilationist attitude. If you don't suspend your belief, not only you are irrational, but you also incur intellectual blame.

According to the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation, the protagonists of a religious disagreement all have the same data (evidences), the same capacities, and as already said, none of them is intellectually limited, malicious or dishonest. When a person suspends his belief – following the moral and social requirement of the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation – he looks at this belief according to what he shares (data, abilities) with those who do not believe the same as him, or those who, on the same basis, believe something else. This self-examination is a control of his right to believe and it ends with suspension. That means that these data and abilities are absolutely independent of any beliefs. And it means also that such beliefs would not themselves be involved in these data and abilities. To believe is to assent; but assent is not included in data and abilities themselves. Assent is added to them, but in an illegitimate way as soon as an epistemic pair challenges the belief (on the same bases, that is, data and abilities).

But is it true that to believe is to assent on the basis of data (what is the belief about) and certain dispositions whose belief results? The question arises in general. But here I only want to ask it for the case of religious beliefs such, for example, as belief in the Trinity.

Can we describe things this way?

1. Epistemic peers share data and abilities, and they recognize one another as possessing them.
2. A person believes in the Trinity.
3. He meets an epistemic peer who does not believe in the Trinity.
4. He gives up his belief.

I strongly doubt this scenario, which seems to be much prepared for the philosophical classroom. (I have much more doubt about this scenario than about the Trinity!) I doubt also this scenario because to believe in the Trinity is to believe that without the Trinity one would not believe in it. Then, if I meet an epistemic peer who disagrees with me (and I know a lot of them, some of them are even good friends and persons I consider to be more clever than me[5]), I consider that it is he, my supposed epistemic peer, who has a problem, not me who must put me to doubt.

I do not deny that we can find ourselves in a situation where epistemic parity (and the epistemic substitutability that follows) justifies the respect of the Principle

[5] Even intellectually very simple people, and I would say even idiots, believe in God and in the Trinity, and they believe legitimately! This does not mean that one must be foolish to believe in God, but that warrant of religious beliefs is not due to the intellectual effort of justification made by the believer. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3).

of Intellectual Conciliation. An example that is often found in the literature on this Principle is as follows. Two friends often go out to dinner together at the restaurant. They must calculate the tip of 20% (we obviously are in the United States!) before sharing the bill. The two friends have been doing this for years and most of the time they have agreed on how much each one has to pay. But, this time, one of them announces $ 45 and the other says $ 43. In this case, of course, it seems reasonable that the two suspend their beliefs about what to pay. However, why would it be the same when it comes to the belief in the Trinity? To believe that the addition is $ 45, is to have confidence, even if it is not a complete one, in his own mental calculation from data common with the one who believes that the addition is $ 43. But it is not at all the same in the case of belief in the Trinity!

Perhaps the conciliationist reasoning works also well for the belief that there is milk in the refrigerator: I might be led to give it up when I realize that my wife – to give an example of someone I am tempted to recognize as an incontestable epistemic peer – believe there is no milk in the refrigerator, contrary to what I thought. But belief in the Trinity does not place us in a similar scenario, simply in another domain. The triviality of the examples given in the books and articles of analytic epistemology is here an obstacle and not an aid to understand what happens in certain cases. When it comes to the Trinity, is it the way things are, and the way they must epistemologically to happen, in order for the belief in the Trinity to be epistemologically legitimate and a person have the right to believe in the Trinity? My thesis is that there are in such a situation no neutral data, common to epistemic peers, from which the belief in the Trinity derives. The reason is that no one has a belief in the Trinity as a result of certain observations and dispositions allowing him to judge whether it is appropriate or not to believe in Trinity.

Those who believe in Trinity believe in a revealed Mystery, from which they owe their being, from which they live, and toward which they strive, and not in something that they discover from data and abilities because they reason rightly and are quite clever! They think that the Trinity is the source of their belief in a one and triune God, and not that they arrived themselves to such a belief. No one believes in the Trinity *apart* from the Trinity itself.

Having faith

My argument, therefore, is that the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation, in a religious context, stands in solidarity with a complete misrepresentation of religious beliefs such as belief in the Trinity. In this misrepresentation, legitimate religious beliefs are conclusions of data and capacities that would be shared by epistemic peers, conclusions to be suspended when they disagree. One of them would perceive, while listening to the other, that he does not have the right to believe, for example in the Trinity, since the other does not believe in it, and that therefore he must stop to believe or suspend one's belief.

The Principle of Intellectual Conciliation is based on the generalization of a certain epistemic attitude presented as ideal: religious epistemic pairs debate at a symposium of analytical philosophy and examine data and abilities, and if they disagree

they suspend their beliefs (before, finally, everyone is going to dinner)![6] I mean that the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation seems to me to be related to a very narrow and idiosyncratic representation of doxastic life, especially in religious contexts. (I suppose it would be the same in political contexts, or in aesthetic contexts).

Why should we then reason this way? I believe in the Trinity, not him, yet we have the same data and the same abilities. So, I have to suspend my belief. Why should I not think that we have neither the same data nor the same capabilities; that we are not exactly substitutable for each other; that we are definitively not epistemic peers? We are not peers *because* I believe in the Trinity and not he. All I can conclude is that he is a Muslim, a Unitarian, or an unbeliever, and that, for my part, I am not. But in most cases, I knew it from the start. It is reasonable to conclude that the difference between us is not a secondary difference. To be Christian, Muslim, or unbeliever makes a *radical epistemic difference* – a difference that cannot be suspended at will, only in order not to create disagreement! For to be a Christian or to be a Muslim is not to have a belief to which it would be possible to give up, or possible to suspend, simply because of this disagreement between purported epistemic peers. And it is simply not possible either to renounce or suspend it while *remaining* Christian or remaining Muslim.

What I am saying means that *having faith* is not about drawing a consequence or conclusion from certain data or abilities. Faith is not an epistemic attitude – a mental state, a mode of consciousness – with multiple contents according to different religions. But faith has only *one* content. That is why it is exclusive. The one who does not have *my* faith does not have another, with another content, and on the basis of the same data and abilities than mine. The one who does not have my faith has in reality none. When we come to look at faith as a term common to different options, a Jewish faith, a Muslim faith, a Christian faith, etc., according to a pluralistic account of faith, we are actually talking about something other than faith. The one who has faith continues to believe in the Trinity, even if he meets someone who does not share his faith. He did not meet someone who has *another* faith, but someone who *does not* have faith – which is not an option, as if having faith was a possibility of the same kind as to like oysters or to prefer holidays by the sea. If the unbeliever is rational, well informed, epistemologically scrupulous, etc., nothing is changed. It is not that the believer psychologically immunizes himself against the criticism of his beliefs. It is just that having faith is not an epistemic option taken from data common with the unbeliever.

In this sense, we are quite close – as Peter van Inwagen [Inwagen, 2005, especially p. 147] suggests – to what happens when you meet a philosopher who claims that the outside world does not exist. He is competent; he can be very intelligent and have impressive arguments; he can be a quite smart philosopher, writing in the best journals. But you do not think that not believing in the existence of the outside world is an option, except in the philosophical classroom. You do not suspend your belief and you do not decide to give it up! It is not the least irrational not to do it and it is even intellectually perfectly reasonable. It is related to the nature of belief, as it is related to the nature of faith.

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[6] It is also possible that one of the presuppositions of this thesis is the possibility of *deciding to believe* (doxastic voluntarism), of which there are some reasons to doubt.

Is a doctrinal exclusivist intellectually arrogant and socially intolerant?

This criticism of the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation may be considered intellectually arrogant and also socially disturbing. What can I answer, from my non-pluralistic and even exclusivist account, on these two points?

Arrogance is a moral defect. We are indeed always tempted to use this term in order to qualify an intellectual attitude that displeases us. But the question is how it is defined. For example, the conciliationist will be tempted to define it this way. *S* is intellectually arrogant if he supposes that his own belief should be held true by anyone, even by those who have no way of knowing that this belief is true. But defined this way, arrogance simply follows from the rejection, on the basis of the Principle of intellectual Conciliation, of religious exclusivism. However, what appears for the conciliationist to be arrogance becomes on the contrary *intellectual courage* (or *strength*), and so virtuous, for the religious exclusivist. Such courage is a virtue that opposes two vices. On the one hand, intellectual cowardice, when one is always afraid of one's own beliefs, to the point of pretending to give up or suspend them as soon as they are disputed. On the other hand, intellectual recklessness, when one is indifferent to any questioning of one's beliefs. The exclusivist shows confidence in one's beliefs and the courage to do so, even when he listens to the person who contradicts him.

For one who believes that God is one and triune, and that this belief is one of the most important we can have, whoever thinks the opposite is simply wrong, and this opponent *should* believe it. Whoever does not have the religious beliefs I have is not necessarily irrational. Often, we understand very well why someone, perfectly rational and clever, does not have the beliefs he should have. For example, that he is living in a context where it is difficult to acquire or to receive these beliefs is a reason I can understand quite easily. (Even if it gives not any right to be wrong[7].) But understanding that someone does not believe what you believe does not lead to suspend or give up your religious beliefs. And if I cannot find a reason, in this case it is for me non understandable why someone does not believe what he should have to believe.

Criticism of the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation appears to imply the "scandal of peculiarity". It would be morally scandalous to consider that a particular church possesses the true religion, to the exclusion of others. Now, what gets in the way of this scandalous peculiarity is religious pluralism, which then becomes the only acceptable thesis, or religious scepticism, favoured by the conciliationist. It is the only solution to avoid the scandal of peculiarity.

However, this alleged scandal of the peculiarity is paradoxical. On the one hand, pluralism does not escape exclusivism: "'Religious pluralism' is not the contradiction of religious exclusivism, but one more case of it" [Inwagen, 1997, p. 300] says Peter van Inwagen. Pluralism also defends the idea that a group has the truth, those who defend pluralism! On the other hand, if we talk about scandal, it is because we see in exclusivism something immoral. But exclusivism cannot be rejected for its immorality to the extent that, if what I said is correct, exclusivism is

[7] On this point, see: [Pouivet, 2013, p. 13–17].

logically inherent in certain beliefs, especially in certain religious beliefs. Of course, some would say that all religious beliefs are immoral, by principle. But conciliationism, here disputated, is not an argument for this claim.

Generally, to believe something is to believe it is true; and therefore to think that those who believe something else or the opposite are wrong. We cannot believe that *p* and believe that *p* is not true[8]. One can certainly believe that *p* and think that it might not be true. But as long as it is believed, it is believed as true; and when one doubts a lot or thinks it is false, one does not believe it anymore. To believe in what is doubtful or doubtful or as false is not to believe, but to *accept* (which is close to simulate belief), or simply to *play* with ideas. So, if exclusivism was morally scandalous, it is every belief, or at least every religious, and also political, philosophical and even scientific belief, that would be morally scandalous (and of course religious pluralism would also be).

To consider intellectually immoral any non suspended belief – especially in the field of religious beliefs – is a confusion between, on the one hand, *doctrinal* exclusivism and, on the other hand, *religious* exclusivism and *soteriological* exclusivism. The first means that *only one religion is true*, and even more precisely that one church tells the truth; the second is the thesis that only one religion is socially acceptable, and that all others must be eliminated in a social community; the third affirms that salvation depends on the acceptance of only one religious doctrine. The rejection of the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation certainly encourages doctrinal exclusivism, but such rejection does not imply religious exclusivism and soteriological exclusivism. Now, the moral and social anxiety about exclusivism is more really about religious exclusivism and soteriological exclusivism. In fact, doctrinal exclusivism has no social consequences. You can think that only your religion is the true one, you hurt nobody! It does not follow from the fact that you are right that believers of other confessions or unbelievers must be hunted and of force converted, and you have not at all to think that they all will go to hell. (You can even have independent reasons to think that they do not risk hell more than you do!)

Conclusion

My conclusion is that it is wrong that we should suspend any religious belief that an alleged epistemic peer does not share as soon as we become aware that he does not share it. It is not true that it is rational in any case to respect the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation, and that another attitude would always be irrational and morally disgusting. This principle is sceptical in its premises and not simply in its conclusion; to apply it to religious beliefs is simply to think that such beliefs are irrational or at least quite doubtful. The Principle does not show at all that it is rational or epistemologically cautious to suspend religious beliefs but it presupposes it. In addition, the reasoning in the defence of this Principle presupposes also a very inadequate philosophical psychology of religious beliefs and faith. It even misrepresents what faith is.

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[8] "…if I do adopt a certain set of beliefs, I have to believe that I and those who agree with me are right and that the rest of the world is wrong", says [Inwagen, 1997, p. 299].

Let's go back finally to the "political" problem. How can religions coexist in the same society if each of them is doctrinally exclusivist? The question arises, but that is an entirely different question than the one of intellectual ethics, whether we have *the intellectual right* to be exclusivist in matters of religious faith. It is a question of legal (not epistemic) law, and also, I agree, it is a moral question. How do people who do not share some fundamental beliefs, and even disagree strongly about them, can live together in a single political society? Like everyone else, I realize that often cohabitation between those who do not have the same religion is not easy at all – and historically it has never been easy. And this, even if nothing in doctrinal exclusivism implies religious exclusivism, nor coercive measures against minority religions. I have no solution to propose, but I don't see why the claim that doctrinal exclusivism is irrational would help to resolve the problem that religious exclusivism create for a common social life between believers of different religions. To pretend to solve this problem by saying that believers are wrong to believe what they believe, simply because they do not agree with each other, and should therefore give it up, seems absurd to me. The true question is rather to know how people who disagree, and have no epistemological reason and no moral obligation to stop to disagree, can live together. But, my intention was more limited than to resolve this question: I wanted only to show that it is desperate to claim that the solution to the difficult problem of a common life between people who disagree lies in the Principle of Intellectual Conciliation, in the suspension of belief or the renunciation by believers to their beliefs, if it is anyway possible.

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