

Epistemic Justification and Religious Truth Claims:  
Heim's More Pluralistic Hypothesis

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**Abstract:** In *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*, S. Mark Heim defends a version of “orientational pluralism.” There are two significant aspects to Heim's orientational pluralism: 1) that different religions posit different religious ends, and 2) that different religious orientations have different means of justification by which the “truth” is determined. According to Heim, by adopting orientational pluralism a person can rationally hold both that his own religious beliefs are superior to those of others and that others are entitled to hold quite different beliefs. This essay examines Heim's epistemic and metaphysical assumptions – offering multiple critiques.

**Keywords:** truth, pluralism, difference, epistemology, justification

In his book, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*,<sup>1</sup> S. Mark Heim presents what he calls a “more pluralistic hypothesis.”<sup>2</sup> Heim's position, as its name alludes, is in many ways a response to John Hick's infamous “pluralistic hypothesis” presented in *An Interpretation of Religion*.<sup>3</sup> According to Heim, Hick's pluralism is less pluralistic in that Hick posits a single ultimate reality and a single religious end shared by all traditions. Heim's pluralism, by contrast, proposes the possibility of a plurality of religious ends, and a plurality of justifications in support of diverse beliefs. Heim argues, that by adopting what Nicholas Rescher calls “orientational pluralism” a person can rationally hold both that his own religious beliefs are superior to those of others and that others are justified in holding quite different

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<sup>1</sup> S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995)

<sup>2</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 129

<sup>3</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989)

beliefs. In what follows, I will critically analyze Heim's defense of "orientational pluralism," and shed light on problematic implications of the position. Furthermore, I will argue that Heim's pluralism is far from pluralistic, and instead leads to the end of interreligious dialogue.

"General religious pluralism" is a position that affirms the truth or salvific quality of more than one religious tradition. While it is not necessary for religious pluralism to assert the equality of all religious traditions, this has been a stereotype of general pluralism. David Ray Griffin defines pluralism as two possible affirmations -- one positive, the other negative.

"The negative affirmation is the rejection of religious absolutism, which means rejecting the a priori assumption that their own religion is the only one that provides saving truths and values to its adherents, that it alone is divinely inspired, that it has been divinely established as the only legitimate religion, intended to replace all others. The positive affirmation, which goes beyond the negative one, is the acceptance of the idea that there are indeed religions other than one's own that provide saving truths and values to their adherents."<sup>4</sup>

Common types of religious pluralism include: sociological, theological, ethical, metaphysical, and epistemological. These "types" of pluralism are different means by which one might affirm general religious pluralism. For example, in the case of theological religious pluralism, internal theological doctrines such as divine love can encourage adherents to move from absolutism to pluralism. In the case of Heim's pluralism, it is best understood as epistemological religious pluralism. For Heim, the move to pluralism is rooted in the postmodern epistemic assumption that objective knowledge is unattainable. From this assumption, Heim concludes that all knowledge and all beliefs are subjectively oriented. He asserts that the various ways

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<sup>4</sup> David Ray Griffin, *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 3

of being orientated to the world have different ways of judging beliefs -- a plurality of contextual forms of reasoning. For Heim, what is true is true. However, because people from different orientations do not always agree on how to decide what is true -- since each group has its own means of epistemic justification -- we are all equally justified in holding our beliefs. Heim writes,

“In summary, orientational pluralism insists there is only one reality and we are trying to know it. It is not committed to regarding other substantive views as equally valid, only as tenable from different perspectives. What is fragmented is not truth but justification or warranted assertability. The justification offered by a philosophy may be orientationally limited in appeal, but the claims themselves can be universal and unrestricted (Rescher, 1985, 190). People who rationally hold contradictory views from different orientations are each justified in thinking the other wrong. ‘We can only pursue the truth by cultivating our truth’ (Rescher 1985, 199). Philosophical positions are not opinions but judgments.”<sup>5</sup>

This summary, in which Heim demonstrates his deep indebtedness to Nicholas Rescher, provides an incredible amount of substance in just a few sentences. Consequently, it might prove helpful to look more closely at this summary and its philosophical commitments.

First, Heim states that there is only one reality. Understanding his commitment to metaphysical realism is the first step in understanding his orientational pluralism. It seems Heim is also presupposing a correspondence theory of truth, which means for Heim to say that there is only one reality, is also to say that there is only one truth. Therefore, conflicting truth claims are either not conflicting or at least one of them is not true. As Heim writes, “Reincarnation takes

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<sup>5</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 137

place or it does not. Jesus rose from the dead or did not."<sup>6</sup> This conception of truth and reality is not essentially pluralistic. What makes Heim's position a "more pluralistic hypothesis" is not his theory of truth, but his theory of justification. It is this commitment to realism and a correspondence theory that saves Heim from falling into sheer relativism.

Because there is only one reality, Heim contends that incompatible views cannot be equally true. They can, however, both be reasonable or justifiable. As Heim states, "what is fragmented is not truth but justification."<sup>7</sup> Persons from diverse orientations often have different starting points. Therefore, even if identical logic was applied in two different circumstances, diverse conclusions can still arise. Imagine two people who begin a road trip; one in LA, the other in New York. Both people follow the same directions (e.g. drive 30 miles north, etc.), yet the two will end up in quite different places. This realization may be utterly obvious, yet it is important to consider. In the example, diverse results do not occur as a matter of following a different set of rules or directions, but from having different starting points. Similarly, those using the same logic from different cognitive orientations will come to different conclusions. Not only so, but these diverse orientations also have different means of justification, which means that even if they had a shared starting point, there diverse forms of rationality may lead to divergent conclusions. Again, imagine two people who begin a road trip, both starting from the same location. One uses a compass the other uses landmarks. With different means of

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<sup>6</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 155

<sup>7</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 137

navigation, the two may start in the same place, but take very different routes. In this example, it is important that the two travelers are not headed toward a single destination. For, according to Heim, it is possible to conceive of different religions as different paths to different destinations or “religious ends.” Here, the different means of navigation can be seen as analogous to different forms of justification, rationality, and conceptions of truth.

Heim posits pluralities of epistemic justifications – that is, a plurality of ways beliefs are justified. Typically, justification requires some form of rational support. But what gets counted as rational evidence in favor of a particular claim? In the U.S. legal system, for example, the suspect's DNA at the crime scene, an eyewitnesses account, etc., would all be considered valid evidence. However, it is possible to imagine another legal system that excludes DNA evidence, or perhaps only relies on the testimony of a psychic. The point here is that in different legal frameworks, what is considered rational evidence can differ greatly. Similarly, in different religious frameworks, what counts as justification may also differ greatly.

So why does this matter? What do different forms of rationality and justification imply? After considering both the realist interpretation of reality and the orientational theory of justification separately, it might help to consider how they mutually influence each other. According to Heim, “there is a common contemporary reflex which asserts that to privilege one’s own conclusion is the same as denying that others are possible or reasonable.”<sup>8</sup> Heim argues that this reflex is unnecessary, and that orientational pluralism can adequately maintain both

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<sup>8</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 138

the privileging of one's own position while accepting the reasonableness of different positions. But how does he maintain this tension?

Is it possible to hold a justified false belief? If so, what can be meant by justification? Imagine a situation where a set of identical twins decided to trick the new babysitter by pretending to be each other. They wore each other's clothes, responded to each other's names, etc. In such a situation, it seems perfectly rational, perfectly reasonable, for the sitter to assume that the children are who they claim to be. Nevertheless, the sitter would be wrong. It seems, therefore, that reasonableness does not ensure accuracy of fact. Actually, this is often the point of deception. People are most easily deceived when it is perfectly reasonable to believe something false. The contemporary epistemological problem posed in Edmund L. Gettier's paper, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"<sup>9</sup> demonstrates, amongst other things, that a belief can be justified and false. If Gettier is correct, then to challenge the reasonableness of another's conclusions should be distinct from contesting the truth of another's conclusion. If Gettier is wrong, and all justified belief is necessarily true belief, then to say as Heim does, that those of different orientations can pose different conclusions, yet still be justified is to either suggest: 1) that all groups hold true beliefs (even though the beliefs in question appear contradictory), or 2) that not everyone is justified, since contradictory beliefs cannot be true. If 1) is correct, then Heim needs a way to account for the truth of both "p and -p." If 2) is correct, then Heim's hypothesis is mistaken, since contradictory beliefs cannot both be justified. Since there is no universal means of justification, there is no universal means of

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<sup>9</sup> Edmund L. Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" in *Analysis* (Vol. 23:6, 1963): 121-123

determining the truth. Does it follow, then, that all are equally justified? What reason do we have for assuming "the other" is rational in her own right? Even if we do assume proper rationality of the other, what reason do we have for thinking such rationality is equal? These are very real and very difficult questions, which Heim does not adequately address.

One of the biggest problems confronting Heim's position is the problem of conflicting truth claims. If, as Heim suggests, "there are real metaphysical differences, real ontological questions with real answers,"<sup>10</sup> what are those answers? It seems that if Heim holds to metaphysical realism (that there is only one reality) as well as a correspondence theory of truth (that a proposition is true if it properly corresponds to reality), Heim's position has no way to deal with incompatible and contradictory beliefs. To use Heim's own example, "Reincarnation takes place or it does not. Jesus rose from the dead or did not."<sup>11</sup> Contradictory claims cannot both be true. It cannot be the case that "p and not-p." So, what does Heim do in such matters?

Heim writes, "No one can make good the claim to have a 'God's-eye view'." At first glance, it seems he is claiming that believers do not have necessary access to the grounds of their beliefs. This, interpretation, of course, depends upon my western philosophical assumption that if such objectivity were attainable, it would lead to objective truth. While objectivity (a God's-eye views) might be counted as justification in my western orientation, it is possible that objectivity is not a means of justification for people of different orientations. So, perhaps to understand Heim's

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<sup>10</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 154

<sup>11</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 155

argument more correctly, it's not that the truth can't be known because we will never escape our orientation, but that "our truth" is as good as "the truth," because for all intents and purposes, it is "the truth," since it is all we have! Such a conclusion, however, smacks of relativism. From the atheist orientation it is true and reasonable to say that God does not exist. Similarly, it is true and reasonable, from the theistic orientation, to say that God does exist. But how can it be both "p and -p?" This becomes particularly problematic when we realize that contradictory claims made from within specific orientations are presented as universal claims which expand far beyond the limits of any single orientation. As Heim himself admits, "the justification offered by a philosophy may be orientationally limited in appeal, but the claims themselves can be universal and unrestricted."<sup>12</sup> Here, it may be helpful to consider Heim's comment about religious ends: "they cannot both be true at the same time of the same person. But for different people, or the same person at different times, there is no necessary contradiction in both being true."<sup>13</sup>

At this point, I wonder if Heim is making the same distinction as Hilary Putnam. In his infamous essay "Brains in a Vat,"<sup>14</sup> Putnam argues that seemingly incompatible claims aren't really conflicting because the orientations of those making the divergent claims are such that they do not mean the same thing. A similar argument can also be found in Wittgenstein's "Lectures on Religious Belief."<sup>15</sup> Again, consider the example of a theist saying, "God exists" and an atheist

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<sup>12</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 134

<sup>13</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 149

<sup>14</sup> Hilary Putnam, "Brains in a Vat" in *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1-21

<sup>15</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lectures on Religious Belief," in *Lectures and Conversations* ed. by Cyril Barrett (CA: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 53-72



saying, "God does not exist." In such a case, according to the Putnam argument, it's possible that both claims are correct, because what is meant by the theist's use of "God" or "exist," means something utterly different than what the atheist means. This is not merely a language game (as in Wittgenstein), but an issue of orientation and meaning. While it's possible that Heim is intending to borrow from the Putnam variety of Content Externalism, it's far from clear that such is his intent.

Instead, Heim appears satisfied to hold in tension his conviction of a single reality and the plurality of religious truth. He writes,

"In philosophical terms the options are open. There could be many ineffable reals, and only one of them truly ultimate in the sense of exclaiming or being the ground of the others. There could be in fact only one actual ineffable real, substituting equally in the fulfillment of the various religious aims and equally described or not described by the various traditions. Or there could be many coexistent ineffable reals, none of them truly ultimate. Any of those metaphysical conditions could be consistent with the contention that, for instance, Sunyata and God are both ineffable and both real, and that human realization of the one and communion with the other are actual experiential possibilities. Thus, both could be functional religious ultimates. Whereas Hick is committed to saying that 'Sunyata' and 'God' are mythological cultural forms which represent 'the Real', my hypothesis presumes that they are real religious ineffables available to their seekers, while not foreclosing the possibility that one may ultimately be subordinate to the other or both to some other absolute."<sup>16</sup>

But what about claims that are intentionally polemical? Even the terms, theism and a-theism, indicate such a relationship. What of these types of claims? Is it enough to say they can both be real religious realities, or that one might be subordinate to the other? According to Heim, it is possible that in the case of conflicting religious claims, one group could be more accurately identifying reality than another. But,

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<sup>16</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 153-154

because it would require rationality to adjudicate between these conflicting positions, and because different orientations have different means of rationality, we can do no better than to privilege our own position and respect the rationality of others.

If objectivity is unattainable, and all we can do is privilege our own orientation, why should we even make universal claims about reality? Is the believer really justified in making truth claims, or should a believer's claims be limited to the breadth of their justification? That is, since justification is orientational, should universal truth claims be replaced with orientational truth claims? Do believers have an epistemic obligation to refrain or withhold from believing in universal claims?

As Heim clearly states in his summary, orientational pluralism "is not committed to regarding other substantive views as equally valid."<sup>17</sup> So, Heim begins by assuming that one's own view is in fact correct. By beginning with a positive approach to one's own views, rather than a skeptical approach, Heim's orientational pluralism privileges one's own position. And, if one were to privilege a different position, that would then become one's own position -- so whatever position one holds, it becomes one's own privileged position. Perhaps knowledge of "the truth" (which Heim distinguishes from "our truth") is beyond the human grasp. If knowledge of "the truth" requires objectivity -- meaning a stepping outside of one's own perspective to see things from a God's-eye point of view -- and such objectivity is unattainable, then it follows that knowledge of objective truth is also unattainable.

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<sup>17</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 137

That is not to say that one couldn't happen upon the truth accidentally, but that such attainment of the truth would not be considered knowledge. As Heim writes, "We can only pursue the truth by cultivating our truth."<sup>18</sup> In light of this epistemic stance, one might expect a skeptical conclusion – that is, in light of the limits of our orientations and the unattainability of objectivity. Yet Heim does not resort to skepticism. Nor does he appeal to mystery. Instead, Heim acknowledges such limitations as universal and inevitable. As such, he concludes that the "ideal" is impractical and that we should instead proceed to the best of our ability, which means privileging our own perspective.

Ultimately, Heim's pluralism stands and falls on a commitment to the law of non-contradiction, metaphysical realism, the correspondence theory of truth, and a postmodern type epistemology. Heim argues that we can do no better than privilege our own position – our own orientation. He writes, "This is not a legalistic but a thoroughly practical contradiction; we cannot act on two different orientations at once, even if we understand both are defensible."<sup>19</sup> He later writes, "Whose basis of judgment am I to privilege if not my own? If I privilege another, it has become mine in that very act."<sup>20</sup> This is an excellent point! However one might respond with similar questions: "If we privilege our own position, do we really affirm a plurality of justifications? Do we simply affirm our position as superior?" "Are we epistemically justified to do so?" "In what sense is this position pluralistic?"

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<sup>18</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 154

<sup>19</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 138

<sup>20</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 153

So what is the way forward? Heim writes, “My contention is that the way forward in religious pluralism is to focus on the substance of the particular possibilities advanced in the varying traditions, not to reduce them to one possibility. The way forward is to live positively with otherness, not to suggest it is too dangerous to be real.”<sup>21</sup> Here, we see that Heim’s approach, as he intends it, is practical in nature, though it contains philosophical implications and argumentation.

For Heim, the pursuit of different religious ends is part of what produces different religious justifications and different conclusions about truth. Heim contends that religious ends are internally related to the path by which one pursues them. He writes, “Religious ends are not extrinsic awards granted for unrelated performances, like trips to Hawaii won in lotteries. No one is unhappy in nirvana or arrives at it unready, because the state of cessation is an achievement the path makes possible. It is not enjoyed until one has become what the path makes you. The way and the end are one.”<sup>22</sup> So practically speaking, the religious path is an important part of shaping one’s view of religious ends – walking the path shapes one’s orientation.

Not only so, but the process of interreligious dialogue (which Heim advocates), leads to mutual transformation. That is, all parties involved in the dialogue are changed. Just as walking the religious path shapes one’s orientation, so too do the people one encounters. In the case of interreligious dialogue, the mutual transformation that takes place is a transformation of orientations – of perspectives.

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<sup>21</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 154

<sup>22</sup> Heim, *Salvations*, 162

This transformation may be drastic, or may be subtle, but change itself is inevitable. Ironically, while Heim is a proponent of interreligious dialogue, his so-called “pluralism” brings about the death of all dialogue. For what good is interreligious dialogue if we can never do better than privilege our own perspective? Not only do we privilege our own perspective, but in adopting a new perspective, it is only in privileging that position that we find justification for calling our new position an improved position. So, as we currently stand, is there any room for improvement upon our beliefs? If so, is what we would consider an improvement – by virtue of being considered an improvement – already incorporated into our perspective, which we must privilege? Change is inevitable. But to consider a change in one's beliefs an improvement is to make a judgment. And all judgments, as Heim argues, are necessarily bound by our orientations. Much like there is no universal means of justification, there can be no universal means of judgment. What then is the motivation for dialogue in Heim's orientational pluralism? Why engage with the religious other at all? Why not stay in our own religious backyard, continuing to privilege our own orientation, for which Heim claims we can do no better? If Heim's position is to truly inspire interreligious dialogue, such concerns must be addressed.

All in all, I find Heim's alternative thoughtful and refreshing. While I am uncomfortable with the ambiguity regarding the truth and falsity of divergent claims, I am willing to concede that my concerns are rooted in my own orientational expectations and conception of justification. The very nature of Heim's argument makes it difficult to argue against. For even the way that I interpret and critique Heim's argument is dependent upon my own orientation. What I considered a well-

justified philosophical argument, for example, is dependent upon my western analytic philosophical orientation. However, Heim would not fault me for formulating a critique from within my own orientation, since I could do no better. And if I were to be faulted for critiquing Heim from my own orientation, Heim would be equally faulted for defending orientational pluralism from his orientation. But to find fault in the inevitable is nonsense to Heim.

The positive epistemic claim made by Heim is that we always privilege our own perspective. The associated negative claim should be that our perspectives are always limited, and therefore, our claims are rooted in an incomplete epistemic status. This being the case, should we hold beliefs dispassionately? Should universal truth claims be replaced with orientational truth claims? If so, what would become of claims like "God is the creator of the world"? Does God become the creator of my world? Would that imply there are different worlds? Or, must we now preface all claims with: "according to my orientation...?" Much like how beginning a phrase with "no offense, but..." doesn't fully dampen the sting of the criticism to come; so too prefacing a claim with "according to my orientation" does not lessen the universal character of a claim. Unfortunately, Heim does not adequately address these concerns. And this failure is enough to reject his defense of orientational pluralism.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that Heim's position results in the death of dialogue, and is more a position of absolutism than pluralism, I feel compelled to conclude that Heim's argument is a viable possibility in the pluralism dialogue, and can be a useful philosophical approach when considering divergent religious truth claims. There seems to be something about orientational pluralism that requires

further investigation. While there are many questions orientational pluralism doesn't adequately answer, there are many questions posed (and answered) by orientational pluralism that other pluralisms don't adequately answer: "how can we do better than privilege our own position," "what is the universal form of justification," "how is truth determined universally," "how do we attain objective knowledge?" These questions, to which orientational pluralism does provide answers, are equally important to those questions orientational pluralism leaves unanswered. But this conclusion is rooted in a particular orientation, with a particular means of justification, which finds my conclusion reasonable on that particular basis.

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