ABSTRACT: Professor Schmidt-Leukel has claimed that there are only four possible views about truth in religion. Either no religions are true, or only one religion is true (exclusivism), or many are true, and either one is superior (inclusivism) or all are about equally true (pluralism). I argue that the ideas of equal or superior truth are unclear, and that there are many other possible views. I propose a twofold contrast – between closed (rigid, crucially important, and totally authoritative) and open (flexible, varying in importance, and restrictedly authoritative); and between exclusive (only one path leads to salvation) and inclusive (many paths lead towards salvation).

KEY WORDS: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, truth, salvation, open views, closed views, authority, religion

**Religion as propositional**

The classification of religious attitudes to other religions than one’s own into exclusive, inclusive, and pluralist has been very useful. But it is in danger of becoming a Procrustean bed into which all inter-faith attitudes can be fitted, and that is not so useful.

Professor Schmidt-Leukel, in his paper, ‘Religious Pluralism in Thirteen Theses’ in ‘Modern Believing’ 57.1, designs an especially Procrustean bed, and claims that there are only four possible options on how to interpret religious truth claims. The hackles of any logician
will rise at being told that there is only a definite number of logical
options when dealing with something so fuzzy as ordinary language.
It can easily be shown that there are more than the four options
Professor Schmidt-Leukel mentions. It can also quickly be made
apparent that the attempt to impose this sort of logical rigour onto
ordinary language talk about something so fuzzy as ‘religion’ can be
rather misleading.

It is notoriously difficult to define what ‘religion’ is, but I think one
thing it is not is a closed set of truth-claiming propositions. To say
that a religion is true seems to be a category mistake, since truth is a
property of propositions. Religions do typically contain such
propositions, and what one has to ask is whether these propositions,
taken individually, are true or false. This is so in regard to
propositions which claim to show a path to salvation, with which
Professor Schmidt-Leukel is concerned.

The ascription of ‘true’ to a proposition necessarily entails that some
other proposition (its contradictory) is ‘false’. It immediately follows
that not all propositions can be true, and that true propositions
necessarily have possible contradictories. It is therefore a logical
necessity that any proposition in religion can be contradicted. And
two contradictory statements cannot both be true.

Some religions lay out a set of propositions which show a specific
path to salvation. This gives a first set of three logical possibilities: all
religions specify a path to salvation; or only some religions do; or no
religions do. It is fairly obvious that only some do – Shinto, to take
one of hundreds of examples, is not concerned with salvation in any
sense remotely similar to the Christian idea of everlasting life with
God. So we are left with a sub-class of religions that specify a
definition of salvation and a path to salvation. Whatever we say about this sub-class may not apply to religions as such.

**Religion as a way of life**

I would not attempt to define ‘religion’, but it is characteristic of a religion that it specifies a rule of life. A ‘religious’ person is one who follows such a rule as of primary importance in their lives. This rule usually specifies appropriate attitudes to a non-material reality of objective and normative value – prayer to a god who makes moral demands, or meditation leading to the realisation of valued mental states, or rituals aligning individuals with some objectively true way of being. Also, religious rules are usually related to membership of a religious community or group, though such membership may be very loose.

The acceptance of some propositions as true is entailed by the adoption of a rule of life. But exactly what these propositions are is open to many interpretations. They can be very flexibly and vaguely defined – as reverence for the life-forces of the natural world, for instance (like *kami*, in Japanese rituals). What a ‘life-force’ is may remain unconceptualised, though it is not ordinarily physical and it is in some undefined way mind-like (responsive to prayers and offerings). There is often resistance to attempting closer definitions, and emphasis on the cultivation of a non-conceptualised sense of reverence or dependence.

Where the conceptual content of a religious rule of life is flexibly defined, it is hard to say exactly what an ascription of truth excludes – except perhaps that it excludes reductive materialism and the reduction of values to purely subjective preferences, though even that may be contested.
It is not surprising that different tribal ways of life are often not felt to exclude one another, in a conceptual sense. A sense of dependence and harmony with nature can be expressed in many different ways. Of course, life-ways can be exclusive in another sense, that they define a culture, which may seek to impose itself on other cultures. Thus the saying of Hindutva, ‘To be Indian is to be Hindu’ is not an assertion that you must assent to a particular set of propositions, but an assertion that one must accept the spiritual practices of a specific culture. An individual may select from among these practices, or even adopt no spiritual rule of life, but is expected to support the exclusive propriety of such rules of life as are licensed by the culture.

Religious exclusivism is not usually the assertion that only the set of propositions licensed by my religion is true. Hindus would be hard put to it to specify just what that set was. It is more often the assertion that only the spiritual rules of life licensed by my culture (which may be very broad and diverse, but still exclude some practices, like Christianity and Islam in the Hindu case) are socially acceptable.

Christianity is, to an unusual degree, a very propositional form of religion, where assent to detailed creeds is often required. Even then, many interpretations of the creeds may be acceptable. The ascension of Jesus into heaven may be given a metaphorical interpretation, for instance. So might the Genesis creation account or the Book of Revelation talk of eschatology.

In this situation it is not, I think, very helpful to say that different messages of salvation – definitions of what salvation is, and how to attain it – can all be true. What matters is how rigid such beliefs are, how important they are felt to be, how many different detailed
analyses of beliefs there may be, and how many beliefs prevalent in a given religious society can safely be rejected or ignored.

Some Christians may give a very precise, rigidly defined, and detailed account of salvation and a precise account of how to be saved. They may think it is crucially important to have those beliefs, deny that different interpretations are acceptable, and say that no beliefs in their authoritative account can be ignored.

But others may give a much less rigid account – perhaps, that salvation is human fulfilment in relation to a supreme source of value, and that trying to follow Jesus in a life of self-giving love is a good way to achieve salvation. They may say that there are many diverse detailed ways of filling out these flexible notions, that some of these more detailed ways can be ignored or rejected, and that it is usually not of great importance, though it may be of great interest, to have such detailed accounts. And between these two extremes is a whole spectrum of other possibilities.

Religious truth claims

Now consider Professor Schmidt-Leukel’s allegedly ‘exhaustive’ list of possible answers to the question of the truth of religious claims about paths to salvation. First, we could say that all such claims are false – there is no salvation. Second, we could say that only one set of claims is true. This must be the case, if diverse sets of claims contradict each other. It might be that there is one rigid definition of salvation and its path, given on unquestionable authority (that is the ‘exclusivist’ view). He then lists just two further views – that many sets of claims in a religion are true, but one is superior; and that many sets of claims are true, but equal in truth. I doubt whether these are most helpfully construed as different views of truth, since they both in fact (I shall argue) hold that only one set of claims is
true, but they spread those claims over a number of ‘religions’. I also doubt whether there are only these two further possibilities.

The most obvious possibility he does not mention is that many religions are true, but some of them (not just one) are true in a superior way, perhaps with varying degrees of superiority (probably construed in terms of the rigidity or perceived importance or authoritativeness of defined propositions). If the idea of ‘superior truth’ makes sense, this is an obvious possibility in addition to there being just one superior truth, or to many religions being equally true.

There are other possibilities also. There could be a true set of claims about salvation, though it is not held by any one religion (every actual religion might make mistakes in defining salvation and its path). We could dissociate truth-claims from a particular community or authority. We could practice ‘multiple belonging’, or better, ‘non-belonging’, constructing a rule of life of our own, and selecting what we think to be important or capable of detailed definition. We are not then saying that ‘many actual religions are true’. We are saying that many of them contain some true (but also some false) salvific claims, and that it is better not to belong strictly to any of them.

Another possibility is that the definition of salvation in some religion might be so flexible that it is unclear what would contradict it (If God is Being-itself, another religion that stressed union with Being but did not speak of God could be complementary, not contradictory. Both could be called ‘true’, but to say that would obscure the main point, which is that flexible truth-claims can be stated so as not to contradict each other). Obviously any statement that such definitions must be rigid would raise a contradiction (that contradiction would be internal to that religion). This is not really saying that many religions are more or less ‘equally true’. It is saying that very flexibly
phrased truths allow acceptance of complementary (but not contradictory) truths. This is like the view Elizabeth Harris takes in her paper, ‘How Buddhism has affected my Faith’, in the same issue of the journal, where she says that for her belief in God is primary, but Buddhist practices valuably complement Christian ones, and even help to correct some limitations present in traditional Christianity (on the treatment of animals, for example). On such a view, one can belong to one tradition, and use complementary practices and concepts from others, or one can belong to two or more traditions, while rejecting some of the truth-claims of each, perhaps.

A different view is that you might have a rigid definition of salvation (for instance, that salvation is union with a Trinitarian God) with a flexible definition of the path to it (there may be many complementary paths that lead, however deviously, towards the one goal). This is close to the so-called ‘inclusivist’ view. But the salvific definition does not ‘include’ all truth statements in other religions, and its truth is not ‘superior’. Its definition of salvation is just straightforwardly true, and it might be better to say that the attainment of salvation is compatible with believing many false propositions.

A more radical view is that there might be different goals (definitions of salvation), which could all be attained by their own paths (in a sense, all religions might be ‘true’). Christians go to heaven, Buddhists enter Nirvana; Christians get resurrected, and Hindus get re-incarnated. It is hard to take this seriously, but some do, and it is possibly true, even if unlikely. Of course, if you say that heaven is more like Nirvana than has often been thought, and vice versa; and that resurrection in a succession of bodies is more like re-incarnation than is commonly thought, and vice versa; then that is
back to the position that if truths are understood flexibly enough, they can be complementary.

Alternatively, there might be quite rigid definitions of goal and path given by some authority, but great flexibility in how far one had to conform to that authority. This would not be saying that many views are true, or that one is superior to others. It is saying that there is an official view, but one is free to reject or loosen parts of it if that seems appropriate. I suspect this is the actual position of many Christian believers.

Finally, there might be moral, intellectual, and psychological criteria which religions have to meet to be acceptable (perhaps they must be good, rational, and personally fulfilling), but all religions that met them could be called ‘true’, since they are all mythical frameworks for supporting ways of life that turn people from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. This seems to be John Hick’s view, and it is a viable possibility. But of course it will be opposed by anyone who thinks that there really is, or that there really is not, a personal God.

**In conclusion**

I doubt if I have covered all possibilities, since the concept of religion is a very flexible concept, and ‘truth’ is only one component that exists within a complex context of practice and community. Truth itself is a highly contested concept among philosophers. It is important in religion, but it is unlikely that it can be neatly aligned with an allegedly exhaustive list of alternatives in the messy and not logically neat world in which we live.

So I think the ‘exclusive/inclusive/pluralist’ distinction has been very helpful. But it has sometimes led to unclear assertions about different religions being superior or equal to each other. So it might
be helpful to distinguish clearly between believing true propositions and being saved, enlightened, or liberated. Then one can have the following fourfold division with regard to questions about the true way to salvation.

There is first a division between ‘closed’ and ‘open’ ways of affirming truths. The closed way is to insist on one rigid and unchangeable definition of the goal of salvation, and to hold that accepting this definition is crucially important to salvation. A closed way will usually also hold that some authority gives the definitions, and is to be accepted unquestioningly. The open way is to adopt a more flexible view, and be prepared to accept new insights from developments in knowledge and from other religious traditions. It will usually hold that not all truths widely propounded in a religion are equally important, and that any religious authority that exists should allow disagreement on less important issues.

Second, there is a division between ‘inclusive’ and ‘exclusive’ attitudes to salvation. The exclusive way is to insist that there is only one rigidly defined way to salvation. The inclusive way is to say that all people are included in the possibility of salvation, if they follow their own paths justly and sincerely. Then one might recommend an open and inclusive attitude to many religions, while avoiding questions about whether one is ‘more true’ than another, or whether some of them are ‘equally true’.

Above all, one can stop saying that religions are true or false, as though a religion consisted just of a set of truth-valued propositions that could be neutrally assessed. There are sets of truths in religion, and one should be concerned to believe only true propositions. But one should also be hesitant about claiming to know all these true propositions, and be aware of the ethical, ritual, and social
dimensions which are so important to becoming a member of a religion. In this respect, of course, most of what Professor Schmidt-Leukel says is true and important. But it does not really entail that there are only four possible attitudes to take to inter-religious truth, or that becoming a pluralist and saying that many religions are more or less equally true is the most reasonable position to choose. Since few religious believers are likely to think that lots of other religious beliefs are just as true as the ones they hold dear, this will be no great loss to the cause of inter-religious dialogue.

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