

Garth Hallett

One God of All? Probing Pluralist Identities.

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For the last half-century there has been a concerted effort by religious pluralists to defend the truth of the assertion that adherents to the many and varied world religions all worship and participate in the same reality. This truth claim has been defended in many ways, i.e., historically, theologically, ethically, and philosophically. In *One God of All?* Garth Hallett offers a critical examination of this chief pluralist claim, namely that Allah, Vishnu, Tao, Brahman, Yahweh, God, and nirvana are ‘one’ and the ‘same’. Hallett’s thesis is that a statement such as ‘one and the same’, when used in reference to the transcendent, is highly problematic. His contention, however, is not that such a claim is false, but that it is essentially meaningless.

Hallett opens the book with an overview of various pluralist claims of identity (and he is not light on quotes and references). The various pluralist claims cited are from a wide variety of thinkers, many of which would eschew the label ‘pluralist’, but as Hallett notes, these claims all seem to identify one transcendent reality as present in all the world religions. The significance of the claim that all the world religions participate in the same reality is the next chapter of the book. Here he assesses the apparent value of the pluralist claim in light of a mixture of challenges ranging from the ‘secular challenge’ to a challenge ‘specifically for Christianity’. Hallett summarizes these two chapters with a set of questions: ‘To the question, “How important are the pluralist’s identity claims?” or “How likely are they to be true?” we must repeatedly reply, “Which ones?” I might now add, “Important for whom?”’ (22).

Chapter 6 is the hub of the book, in the sense that all other chapters lead to or flow from it. Up to this point Hallett has surveyed the many pluralist claims and has focused on the claim of ‘identical reference’, according to which religions worship and participate in a reality that is ‘one and the same’. But it is in this ‘Neglected Questions’ chapter that Hallett’s thesis is most clearly made, namely that assertions which claim that ‘Allah, Vishnu, Tao, Brahman, Yahweh, God, nirvana, and others are the same sacred reality...are meaningless’ (61). Hallett makes a distinction between what he calls the ‘identity question’ and the ‘individuation question’. He writes, ‘The identity question starts with an x and a y (e.g., the book in my right hand and the book in my left hand) and asks if they are identical. The individuation question asks a prior question, namely what makes the x *an* x (e.g., *a* book in my left hand) and the y *a* y (e.g., *a* book in my right hand)’ (62). Hallett explains that some terms have individuating criteria while others do not, and that for those that do the criteria will vary from term to term. For example, Hallett suggests that we can speak about the ‘same’ lake that dries up and returns with the rains, but we cannot speak about the ‘same’ puddle drying up and returning. We can speak of the ‘same’ social club that, over time, changes all of its members; but we cannot speak about the ‘same’ book if all of the words have been changed. ‘Class by class,

category by category, the criteria of individuation differ widely' according to Hallett and this is fine and well. The trouble arises when pluralists employ words such as 'thing', 'being', or 'reality', for they lack any clear criteria and so these 'claims look empty' (62).

The force of Hallett's critique comes when he shows that, when asked if two items are the same, the question can be met with the reply, 'the same *what?*'. A person can hold up two books and ask if they are the same, that is, if they are the same copy, and the answer is clearly 'no'. If asked if they are the same novel the answer could be 'yes'. But, if someone asks whether 'God and nirvana are the same, the answer will have to be, "The same *what?*". If the questioner replies, "the same thing", there can be no answer; for there are no individuating criteria for things in general' (62). And even if the reply comes that these are the same 'god', the problem of individuation is not resolved; for 'god', like 'thing', 'reality', or 'being', has no class of objects in which it neatly fits. Hallett suggests that 'god' or 'spirit' is like the word 'treasure' in that there is no known class of objects known as treasure. One cannot go to a supermarket and buy 'six bananas, a loaf of bread, two packets of soap and three treasures' (63).

After posing his critique, Hallett devotes the remainder of the chapter to possible reasons why pluralists have neglected to address the issue of individuation. Hallett explores whether it is due to various problems concerning the nature and use of language. Pluralists may have simply been inattentive to linguistic concerns or perhaps they have missed the subtle but important nuances and opacities in language. Hallett employs Wittgenstein's discussion of games as one possible reason for the pluralist omission of individuation. Hallett wonders if John Hick is aware of the 'Principle of Relative Similarity' when using concepts such as 'one' and 'many' on the one hand and 'person', 'good', or 'loving' on the other. Wittgenstein famously argued that games have no essential commonality, but they all share a 'family resemblance', we can say that this and similar things are called 'games'. The relative similarity between the activities allows us to properly say such and such are games and likewise we could say that such and such are 'persons' or such and such is 'good' or 'loving'. But, as Hallett argues, 'one cannot meaningfully say, "These and similar things are one, these and similar things are the same"', because words like 'one', 'same', and 'many', are 'parasitic on whatever term they modify, and criteria of individuation vary widely, even contradictorily, from term to term, for words that have such criteria' (74). Hallett concludes the chapter by arguing that 'to determine whether believers of disparate faiths refer to the same transcendent reality, it is necessary to determine the sort of reference in question as well as the sort of sameness (identity or individuation) and to recognize and address the problems that arise for each of these variables in talk about the transcendent' (78). Put another way, 'The question of sameness...does not make sense at the level required by such interfaith comparisons. For an answer requires criteria of individuation, and there are no such criteria for "beings", "realities", or "things" in general' (79).

The next three chapters are spent addressing possible misgivings, criticisms, and questions that Hallett's thesis may face. He then concludes with a final chapter calling for pluralists to do comparisons rather than make identity claims like those discussed in Chapter 1. Epistemic and metaphysical claims have lost their veracity in light of the

problem of individuation, but parables and comparisons are hardly empty. Comparisons still allow for discussions of genuine significance and pragmatic value. Alluding back to Wittgenstein, Hallett calls upon the Principle of Relative Similarity and analogical understanding of religious terms (such as ‘beauty’, ‘truth’, ‘love’, and more) as a possible means of relieving the tension between disparate religions. What these comparisons, instead of claims, may ultimately bring is unknown to Hallett: ‘Whether, how, and to what extent the beliefs do so converge, and what parables or comparisons might best capture their convergence, must, I suspect, remain largely a mystery’ (128).

Those who are well read in the field of religious pluralism will find this book a pleasant change from the typical debates concerning whether or why Allah, Vishnu, Tao, Brahman, Yahweh, God, and nirvana are one and the same. *One God of All?* is an important reminder to take a step back and consider the meaning, and not just the apparent truth, of the claims that are being made. While it could be argued that Hallett’s thesis would have worked just as well as a long or perhaps two-part journal article, the book is a welcome addition for any scholar working in the field of philosophical theology or philosophy of religions. The work is clear, careful, and in true Wittgensteinian fashion, provides the reader with an ample diet of examples.

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