PUTNAMIAN CONSTRAINTS ON PLURALISTIC THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

PIOTR SIKORA

Pontifical Theological Academy, Krakow

Abstract. There are many arguments that so-called pluralistic theologies of religions face difficulties in being sufficiently pluralistic. In order to meet such an objection, a pluralist offers different solutions. I argue that the range of plausible possibilities for a pluralist is strongly constrained by philosophical arguments which one can develop out of the philosophy of Hilary Putnam. In the first part of this paper, I sketch out three important strands of the Putnamian thought I consider worth defending. Given such presuppositions, I formulate two constraints on pluralistic theology of religions. In the last section of my paper, I briefly point out which of the particular standpoints, often labelled as „pluralistic theology of religions", have problems with meeting formulated constraints, and which of the „pluralists" seem to be in accordance with them.

The name „pluralistic theology of religions" belongs to the threefold typology of theologies dealing with religious pluralism. The three main stands one can take are called exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. We can roughly describe them as follows: The exclusivist holds that only her religion is true and salvific. The inclusivist is more „generous" and acknowledges that other religious traditions contains some truths and can lead their participants to salvation; but she also claim that her religion is the best, i.e. whatever is true and good in other religions exists in a better form in her own religion, so her own religious interpretation of the ultimate condition of humankind is the most adequate one. The pluralist accuses the inclusivist of „religious imperialism" and wants herself to be more humble and generous, and so gives up the very claim that there is a best religious tradition. There are many attempts to formulate a pluralistic stance. But there are also a number of arguments that so-called pluralistic theologies of reli-

gions face difficulties in being sufficiently pluralistic. In order to meet such objections, pluralists offer various solutions. In this paper I want to argue that the range of plausible possibilities for a pluralist is strongly constrained by arguments, which one can develop out of the philosophy of Hilary Putnam.

In the first part of this paper, I sketch out three important strands of Putnam's thought that I consider worth defending: (1) anti-Kantian, internalistic claims; (2) anti-relativistic arguments, especially those directed against the relativism which is based on the „incommensurability thesis"; (3) his vision of language and understanding. Given such presuppositions, I formulate two constraints on pluralistic theology of religions.

In the last section of my paper, I briefly sketch how a pluralistic theology of religions which meets these constraints might look, and point out which of the particular standpoints, often labelled as „pluralistic theology of religions", have problems with meeting these constraints, and which of the „pluralists" seem to be in accordance with them.

I.

The first strand of Putnam's thought I want to sketch out is his internalism. I also call it anti-Kantian, because Kant's philosophical picture rests on the distinction between *noumena* – reality as it is in itself, independently of any experience and perspective – and *phenomena* – reality as it is experienced and conceived by conscious subjects. The very possibility of drawing such a picture presupposes that we are able to attain the „God's Eye View" and to make descriptions from „nowhere", independently of any perspective. The reason is that this is the only place from which we can see/conceive that there are: 1) a *noumenal* reality and 2) a conscious subject who conceives this reality in *phenomenal* forms determined by the system of her epistemic categories. Putnam's internalism questions the possibility of attaining a God's Eye View and so undermines the *noumenal/phenomenal* distinction, and claims that the idea of a *noumenon* is an unintelligible one.

Among Putnam arguments, the most appropriate one for the purposes of this paper rests on logical considerations (developed by Tarski, Russell and others) on how to avoid the semantic paradoxes (Putnam 1990, pp. 11-12). The most plausible solution of these paradoxes is to construct a hierarchy of languages in such a way that one can assert the truth-value of sentences belonging to a given language (L) only in the higher language

(meta-L). This means that we have no unitary notion of truth, but that every language has its own truth-predicate, which is not applicable to the sentences belonging to this very language. This in turn means that if we built a description of the world and asked whether this description is true, we would find that this description could not be the *complete* description of the world – this very description (and this also means: an observer who makes this description) must be outside of the range of the things described. The God's Eye View is unattainable not only in practice but in principle, because the very idea of a God's Eye View is an incoherent one.

In other words: our knowledge is always perspectival and there must be many perspectives each of which is stated in a different language, a different conceptual scheme. The notion of a conceptual scheme is closely related to the notion of conceptual relativity. The pluralism of perspectives amounts to the phenomenon, which Putnam calls „conceptual relativity".

In his many writing he gives many different examples of this phenomenon[1]. One of Putnam's favourite examples belongs to the field of logic (Putnam 1990, pp. 96-104). Consider a world with three individuals: $x1$, $x2$, $x3$. According to Carnap's system of logic, there are three objects in such a world: namely: $x1$, $x2$, and $x3$. But, according to mereology (the logical system developed by Polish logicians, mainly Leśniewski), a world with three individuals contains seven objects. This is because mereology treats as an object every mereological sum of individuals, and there are seven such sums: $x1$, $x2$, $x3$, $x1+x2$, $x1+x3$, $x2+x3$, $x1+x2+x3$. Not only is there a different number of objects in each case, but the very nature of an object changes when we change system. For example $x1$ in Carnap's system is not the same entity as $x1$ in mereology. While the former has the nature of an individual, the latter has the nature of a mereological sum. If $x1$ in mereology were the same entity as $x1$ in Carnap's system, we would not be able to count it together in sums like $x1+x2$ etc.

What we are shown by such examples is that the fundamental ontological notions, such as „object" or „exist" have no one absolute meaning which expresses the metaphysical nature of reality, but only a „multitude of different uses" (Putnam 1990, p. 97). These ontological differences are inter-

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[1] I think there are two types of such examples, each of them showing slightly different sense of conceptual relativity. One of them suggest that conceptual relativity has no practical consequences, the other, on the contrary, closely connects conceptual relativity with differences in practise. Because of the nature of concepts (wihich I explain later) I focus only on the second type.

woven with differences in (logical) practice. It is not only that there are sentences which are true in one system but false in the other. The Polish logician counts objects differently than Carnap. Some logical operations which are possible in one system are not possible in the other.

One can ask how these logical considerations relate to our topic. The answer is that it is not only logicians who use different conceptual schemes in their academic logical practise. All of us use many conceptual schemes in our lives. If it is possible to build many different coherent conceptual schemes on the level of logic, this logical conceptual relativity affects other instances of our conceptual activity. So conceptual relativity reappears at more „worldly" levels. Let us look at such instances which are closer to our topic.

One such example is physics. It has it own purposes, rules for carrying out research, terminology etc. Doing physics, one uses a conceptual scheme in which one can speak about elementary particles, magnetic fields, etc. But the conceptual scheme of physics has no resources to speak about living organisms, persons or pieces of arts. From the point of view of physics they do not exist, as it were. Or better: asking about their existence is nonsense.

Physics has very rigid rules for using its concepts in research and in developing a theory. But there are also more vague and informal conceptual schemes, for example the one in which we talk with each other about the upbringing of our children. It has conceptual resources allowing us to speak about persons, social behaviour, health, moral growth and even the learning of physics. But, on the other hand, it has no resources to speak about elementary particles – from its point of view, the molecular structure of our children is completely irrelevant. Conceiving and speaking about children's identity and change is very important from the point of view of the „upbringing conceptual scheme", but this scheme completely misses the enormous molecular changes occurring in the space-time region which a particular child occupies.

One can (in principle) give a complete physical description on a molecular level of a classroom during a given school lesson. One can give a different, say: pedagogical, complete description of the same classroom during the same period of time. They would be mutually untranslatable complete descriptions, each of them revealing a different ontological structure of the described reality. But neither of these better captures „the world-in-itself".

Only when we adopt a particular conceptual scheme are we able to say what (kind of) objects (may) exist in the world, what properties they may

have, and in what relations they may stand to each other, what is the essence of a given kind of thing and what is only accidental. Our choice of a particular scheme depends on our needs, interest and purposes. And because – as we will see later, the notion of concept is deeply interwoven with the notion of a practical interaction with our environment – pluralism of conceptual schemes is interrelated with a pluralism of possible interactions with the surrounding world. So, Putnam rightly concludes: „Certainly, the Aristotelian insight that objects have structure is right, provided we remember that what counts as the structure of something is relative to the ways in which we interact with it" (Putnam 1994b, p. 78). And because it doesn't make sense to divide the world into reality as it is in itself and reality as it seems to us in a particular perspective (because the notion of reality in itself is an unintelligible one), it doesn't make sense to try to single out one basic conceptual scheme (putatively describing reality as it is in itself in the best way). We can build many conceptual schemes to describe/interpret our experience, and there may be many equally good though mutually untranslatable/ontologically nonequivalent schemes. As we have seen, speaking about „the world (reality) as it is in itself" doesn't make sense.

We can't avoid conceptual relativity. But to accept conceptual relativity doesn't mean to accept relativism. On the one hand, with a particular conceptual scheme in place, we must acknowledge that there are many objective facts to be found out: there are (objective) physical facts, there are (objective) facts in the field of bringing up children, and there are (objective) religious facts. On the other hand, acknowledging that conceptual schemes are autonomous (and not mutually translatable) should not lead to the „incommensurability thesis", i.e. the thesis that „terms used in another culture cannot be equated by meaning or reference with any expression we posses" (Putnam 1981, p. 114).

Putnam argues that the incommensurability thesis is self-refuting: „if this thesis were really true then we could not translate other languages – or even past stages of our own language – at all. And if we cannot interpret organisms' noises at all, then we have no grounds for regarding them as *thinkers, speakers*, or even *persons*" (Putnam 1981, p. 114). Putnam's argument is very similar to that put by Davidson in his famous paper *On the very idea of a conceptual scheme* – that if we cannot translate something which looks like a language into our language, we have no reasons to rank it among languages – and is vulnerable to similar criticism, namely that one person can learn many incommensurable conceptual schemes – in such

a situation we could „interpret organisms' noises" and so regard them as thinkers, speakers and persons in spite of our inability to mutually translate learned conceptual schemes. But, I think, such an argument overlooks the question: *who* can learn many incommensurable conceptual schemes? The statement: „I can do this", presupposes that I have personal identity independent of any conceptual scheme, that is, that I am a thing in itself, the transcendental ego, a *noumenon*. We come back to the first, internalistic argument. As Putnam has pointed out (Putnam 1990, p. 23), the incommensurability thesis presupposes in a camouflaged way the possibility of attaining a „God's Eye View": whoever formulates the incommensurability thesis speaks as if she occupied a „God's Eye View" and saw (somehow outside any conceptual scheme) many incommensurable conceptual schemes.

In order to resolve this problem it is worth asking *why* we build many different conceptual schemes. Putnam answers along the lines of American pragmatism that it is because of having various interests, purposes and needs that we interact with the world in many different ways and so build many different conceptual schemes. We can identify a conceptual scheme by picking out the interests, purposes and needs it is to serve and reflect. But having many interests, purposes and needs, we have only one life, and the unity of our life provides the basis for some kind of integration of various conceptual schemes. Of course, our life isn't a *noumenon*, we can conceive it (and its unity) only within a particular conceptual scheme, so the integration of our conceptual schemes has a conceptual dimension, and this in turn means that we can conceptually compare different conceptual schemes, and somehow measure them, so they aren't totally incommensurable.

Speaking of „conceptual relativity" and „conceptual schemes" is ambiguous unless one clarifies the notion of concept, and this clarification is impossible without saying a little bit about language. I won't describe it at length, but only focus on those aspects that are important with regard to my topic.

The famous Putnamian catchphrase for the theory of language is „meanings aren't in the head". In spite of the many changes Putnam's thought had been subject to, this catchphrase has remained appropriate. „Meanings aren't in the head" means that the meaning of a given token depends on the whole environment (human and nonhuman, and including also the past) in which a given subject uses this token. The last sentence may be understood in many different ways. For the purposes of the present paper, I will interpret it in accordance with Putnam's latest anti-representationalist view. According to this view, concepts are not mental entities which exist in an organ (called mind) separated from the world, entities which we can see in intro-

spection. The representationalist, on the contrary, believes that mind and world are two separate realms. Mind's cognitive activity – we can name it: conceptual activity – consist in building theories of the world – systems of representations. But in the representationalist picture, mind (i.e.: the thinking subject) is not conscious of the world external of the mind itself, mind is conscious only of *representations* of the things of which the world consists. The nature of these supposed representations differs among different theories, but, from the point of view Putnam's argument, these differences do not matter: in each case representationism fails: the strongest anti-representationalist argument in Putnam's philosophy is his model-theoretic reasoning, which he proposes as an argument against *metaphysical* realism (Putnam 1980; Putnam 1981). Putnam agrees that we often think with the aid of signs (written, spoken, imagined). But signs „become" concepts only in use – to have a concept means to have a cluster of abilities, which includes an ability to use certain signs (linguistic expressions of a given concept) appropriately in a given context. But the cluster of demanded abilities includes also an ability of behave appropriately with respect to the given „object" (the referent of a given concept).

Through various considerations Putnam comes to a view close to the „second" Wittgenstein's view of language, whose remarks had shown that the meaning of a word/sentence/token depends on the way it is used in a broader cluster of human activities, called „language games". (The Wittgensteinian notion of a language game is a good counterpart of Putnam's notion of a conceptual scheme). According to Putnam's interpretation of Wittgenstein there is no *one* such thing/property as meaning or reference. In various language games / conceptual schemes language tokens refer to their referents and become meaningful in different ways (Putnam 1992, pp. 158-179).

According to Putnam, to understand a language, to know the meanings of its words may mean several things: (a) to know how to translate them, or (b) to know what they refer to, in the sense of having the ability to state explicitly what the denotation is (other than by using the words themselves), or (c) to be able to use the word in discourse (Putnam 1989, p 32). The average speaker must have some degree of (c). But it may be said that full understanding of a language must embrace (a) and (b). From the point of view of this paper, it is very important that in order to attain (b), one has to describe the use of the words of the language interpreted and – what is even more important – that „the use of words in a language game cannot, in most cases, be described without employing the vocabulary of that game or

vocabulary internally related to the vocabulary of that game" (Putnam 1994a, p. 458). Given conceptual relativity the reason is obvious: as we have seen, they are only conceptual resources of a particular scheme which allow us to speak about objects (referents) seen from the point of view of that scheme/ game. If one uses concepts from another scheme/game, one „sees" different objects, not those which are referents of language tokens used in the scheme one is interpreting. The ability to gain knowledge of what a word of the interpreted conceptual scheme/language game refers to, presupposes the ability to use the terms of that scheme/game – i.e. an ability (c).

But how could one gain an ability (c), unless one were involved in the game being interpreted. As Wittgenstein pointed out, many words have no strictly defined conditions of application, no explicitly stated rule of use. In many cases, in deciding whether to use a given token in a given situation, the language user must rely on her intuition, which she, in turn, develops by making such a decisions and listening to the reactions of her linguistic peers. In most cases an ability to make the right linguistic decisions depends also on extralinguistic skills enabling the language user to engage in activities with which the use of language is interwoven.

Understanding is a cluster of abilities, and has an „analogue" character, rather than a „digital" character – it can increase continuously. One cannot acquire these abilities if one doesn't participate in a given language game, and because language gains its meaning only within a context of extralinguistic activity this amounts to participation in a given form of life. An interpreter's involvement in the interpreted language game/form of life also has an analogue character. Deeper involvement allows for better understanding.

II.

The Putnamian claims stated above put some constraints on the pluralistic theology of religions. Because of the collapse of the idea of the God's Eye View, there is no explanation of religious perspectives that could pretend that it matches, independently of any particular perspective, what is *really* (in itself) going on in religious forms of life. This fact makes questionable every attempt to explain religious discourse from outside: If we cannot attain a non-perspectival explanation, why should one prefer a perspective alien to the investigated one? Isn't there the tacit presupposition that a non-religious explanation is somehow closer to reality in itself?

One can try to defend such „nonreligious" explanations by answering that this is not an explanation given from the God's Eye point of view, but just a better explanation than any of the religious ones. But Putnamian considerations about understanding have shown that in order to understand religious discourse (or better: a particular religious discourse) one has to participate in the form of life with which this discourse is interwoven, and that an adequate explanation of this religious discourse cannot be done in any vocabulary other than the very vocabulary of the discourse interpreted. So one can formulate the first constraint as follows:

(1) pluralistic theology of religions cannot escape inclusivism by claiming to explain the plurality of religions and the characteristics of every particular religious perspective from some neutral point of view higher than all religious viewpoints.

We can say, that such an enterprise is a sign of being captured by an illusion. But there is another illusion: that the pluralist can meet the objection that she is crypto-inclusivist not by claiming she has found one, non-religious, neutral explanation of various perspectival religious traditions, but by recognizing that each religious tradition is an incommensurable whole. It is said that such a standpoint is not crypto-inclusivistic because it acknowledges the pluralism of religions to such a degree that it avoids any unifying explanation of them. Such a religious „incommensurabilist" may try to avoid the arguments against the incommensurability thesis stated above, by claiming that they are sound only with regard to a standpoint applying the incommensurability thesis to whole cultures. The „religious incommensurabilist" has smaller ambitions – she claims only that the parts of cultures, namely religions, are incommensurable.

But one may ask: from what point of view is this religious incommensurability thesis stated? If it is stated from within a particular religious perspective, it is suspicious: no religion treats itself as a part of a broader whole, but rather pretends to be the ultimate explanation of the whole of reality; otherwise it ceases to be a religion, and becomes only folklore. But if the religious incommensurability thesis is stated from outside a particular religious tradition, it violates the first constraint formulated above. And regardless which option one chooses, religious incommensurabilism faces another objection: if religions are incommensurable, why call them all „religions"? Regardless of the lack of a definition of religion, we must see at least a family resemblance among different „wholes" to call them by one name. In order to see (enormous and fundamental) differences between

'religions we must see (enormous and more fundamental) resemblances between them. So we can formulate a second constraint:

(2) a pluralistic explanation of religious pluralism cannot lead to or rest on the „incommensurability thesis".

III.

Now we may ask whether the constraints stated above are discriminative? I think, they are. It can be shown that two widely discussed pluralistic standpoints don't meet these constraints. The first is Hick's „pluralistic hypothesis" (Hick 1989). Hick rests on the distinction between noumenal reality, called by him: „The Real", and phenomenal, personal and impersonal, „appearances" of that reality. According to Hick every religious tradition provides its followers with a system of categories which „constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving, and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality" (Hick 1989, p. 14). Religious categories shape human experience of being in contact with the Real in such a way that nobody experiences the Real in itself. In religious experience, the Real appears to the human being as personal or impersonal, as Trinity or Allah or Brahman or Dharmakaya etc. But, in formulating his hypothesis, Hick speaks as if he was „nowhere" and saw the Real and religious subjects interacting with It. Hick of course doesn't claim that he knows all this with certainty, he states that it's only a hypothesis explaining the variety of religious experience. But as regards accordance with the first constraint, it doesn't matter whether Hick pretends to having formulated a knowledge claim or only a hypothesis. The very possibility of formulating even a Hickean pluralistic hypothesis presupposes the possibility of attaining a „God's Eye view". Hick clearly violates the first constraint.

There are also pluralists who violate the second constraint. These are the views which P. Knitter, in his (2002), calls the „acceptance model", i.e. G. Lindbeck and such post-Lindbeckians as P. Griffiths or W. Placher. G. Lindbeck's so called „cultural-linguistic" position (Lindbeck 1984), resembles Hick's stance in that it also claims there is no experience of the Divine unmediated by a particular system of religious categories. For Lindbeck, language – and that means a system of „external" signs – precedes every experience, even the experience of having thoughts: we can think (have thoughts) only because we have been taught how to speak some language.

In addition, according to Lindbeck, every particular sign gains its meaning only within a whole system. In the case of religion, the system of categories which constitutes a particular religious tradition offers an all embracing framework, a universal perspective which pretends to explain (give a sense to) every phenomenon of our life. Such a vision of religion leads Lindbeck to the thesis that religions are universal and incommensurable wholes: there is no common ground between different religions, no common religious experience, no common theoretical understanding of any religious issue (and maybe no common religious issue). One can „no more be religious in general than one can speak language in general" (Lindbeck 1984, p. 23). But, according to Lindbeck and Griffiths, there is crucial difference between language and religion. Religion offers a universal and ultimate framework for experiencing and understanding the world. So, because of this ultimate character of religion, one cannot follow more than one religious tradition. As Griffith put it clearly: „Bilingualism is possible, but bireligionism is not" (Griffith 1997, p. 11). Lindbeck and his followers clearly violate the second constraint formulated above.

But – one may ask – maybe the two constraint stated here are so strong, that it is impossible to develop any pluralistic theology of religions. Maybe it would be better not to call my paper: „Putnamian constraints on pluralistic theology of religions", but: „On the impossibility of pluralistic theology of religions"?

The case is more complicated also because the incommensurability thesis rests on presuppositions which are shared by Putnam. These are the following statements: (1) Meaning is holistic (the meaning of every particular term depends on the rest of the conceptual system in which this term occurs) and (2) There is no non-interpreted, unconceptualised experience. How it is possible that Putnam agrees with these presuppositions and rejects the conclusion?

I have pointed out, above, one reason against total incommensurability – namely that the unity of our life provides some basis for the integration of different conceptual schemes. But there is a further reason against incommensurability between religious traditions, and this very reason also suggest how one can develop a pluralistic theology of religions.

We have seen that conceptual schemes are built because of particular interests, needs, and purposes. So one can identify a particular conceptual scheme by picking out what interests and needs it reflects and what purposes it serves. Now, I suggest that we identify some conceptual scheme /language game as a religious conceptual scheme/language game when we

recognize that it reflects the profound need of total, infinite and everlasting human flourishing, the need of *eudaimonia, soteria, moksha, annutara--samyak-sambodhi*, and serves the purpose of realising such a need. It is because of this common root, that we can find some family resemblances between different traditions, which allows us to call them by one name: „religions". And because of this common ground, it seems reasonable to treat different religions more as different versions of one internally plura-listic conceptual scheme, rather then as many different conceptual schemes. There are enormous differences among religions. But these are dissimi-larities of a different kind than, for example, differences between Chris-tianity and molecular physics. While an attempt to find, within physics, a counterpart of the notion of grace doesn't make any sense, analogous attempt with respect to Buddhism or Hinduism etc. doesn't seem to be so stupid.

I suggest that essentialism with respect to conceptual schemes is not a plausible stance. We should acknowledge that there is no such a thing as „the essence of conceptual scheme", but that the notion of conceptual scheme may have many justified uses, connected with each other *via* „family re-semblance". Such an acknowledgment allows us to be more flexible and open minded in recognizing similarities and dissimilarities between differ-ent cultural phenomena.

Lindbeck is led astray just because of his essentialism with respect to conceptual or linguistic frameworks. He claims that language – precisely: *a* language – precedes and shapes experience. In the picture he sketches, each language seems to be something ready-made and unchanging. Lind-beck fails to acknowledge that not only language shapes experience, but that experience also shapes language, and so languages change because of experience. Language and experience are mutually dependent. From the Putnamian perspective it would be even better to say that using a language is a part of broader experience, a part of the form of life one lives. There is no human form of life without language (our human experience is always conceptual). But it is only this broader form of life which makes some system of signs meaningful, makes some system of signs a language.

Now, let's look at how all these considerations relate to our topic. Both Hick and Lindbeck fail in their attempt to develop a pluralistic theology of religion because both need to attain a „God's Eye View" in order to formu-late their conceptions. Every theology of religion, whether pluralist or not must be developed from within a particular religious tradition. This means

that one cannot avoid some aspect of inclusivism: it is not necessary to claim one's own religion to be the best one, but it is necessary to start with one's own system of categories in the process of interpreting another religious tradition. But – given a common ground consisting of common needs and purposes allowing us to acknowledge these traditions as religious ones – we can seek a translation, even if partial and imperfect, of some alien categories, we can try to be open for inspiration and influence on the part of the tradition we encounter. Thanks to the mutual dependence of language and experience and some common experiential root, this is possible. However, theology of religions need not be totally inclusivistic, but may be pluralistic, if it recognizes that it is impossible either to comprehend every aspect of other traditions within one's own „home" system of categories and to arrange all religious traditions in some hierarchical order with one's own tradition on the top.

The two Putnamian constraints formulated above are met by pluralistic theologies of religion which are developed from within a particular religious tradition and which acknowledge that religions are neither completely different nor essentially the same – neither one, nor many – but that they are interrelated, constantly developing also because of mutual, inter-religious fertilisation. Is it possible to build such a theology? I think: yes, in many ways. Many theologians have already done a good deal of excellent work in this area – P. Knitter and R. Panikkar are very good examples.

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