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Matthew Stinson

Pepperdine University, matthew.stinson@pepperdine.edu

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Denominational Incompatibility and Religious Pluralism: A Non-Pluralist Response to a Pluralist Critique

Cover Page Footnote

Denominational Incompatibility and Religious Pluralism: A Non-Pluralist Response to a Pluralist Critique
by Matt Stinson J.D./M.Div. Candidate 2020

Samuel Ruhmkorff's article, *The Incompatibility Problem and Religious Pluralism* (2013), surveys the solutions proposed by various Religion Pluralist thinkers to the "incompatibility problem" often raised against Religious Pluralism.¹ The argument that my paper will be responding to is Ruhmkorff's defense to the incompatibility problem. He argues that those who assert the truth of a single faith are face their own incompatibility problem—the incompatibility of denominations within that faith. Ruhmkorff presents a "subsets of belief" defense that can be used in response to denominational incompatibility, and then cross-applies it to Religious Pluralism to likewise solve for religious incompatibility. The argument is meant to show that the religious exclusivist does not escape the incompatibility critique unless she holds up one denomination within a faith as being exclusively correct (which leads to a problematic kind of solipsism) or admits that correct subsets of belief within otherwise incompatible belief systems can render both belief systems correct. My thesis is that it is unnecessary for the non-pluralist to resort to the belief subset argument, and when the pluralist employs the belief subset argument, it still reaches a non-pluralist conclusion. I will end the paper by responding to Ruhmkorff's question-begging objection to how 'confessionalists' (the title Ruhmkorff uses for non-pluralists) define the boundaries of their religions' beliefs.

DEFINING TERMS

Ruhmkorff defines Religious Pluralism as "the view that more than one religion is correct, and that no religion enjoys a special status in relation to the ultimate... the correctness of each (religion) is not due to the correctness of any other religion."² Religious Pluralism does not mandate that every religion is correct, just that more than one religion is correct.³ He uses the term *confessionalist* to refer to both forms of religious non-pluralism: *exclusivists* (those who "hold that one religion is correct") and *inclusivists* (those who "acknowledge substantial and thorough correctness of some sort in religions other than their own," but "analyze this correctness in terms of their own religion").⁴ He combines both forms of non-pluralism because the proponents of each are "committed to an asymmetry among religions, with their own having special status."⁵ To put it another way, when Ruhmkorff uses the term *confessionalist*, he means to refer to people who hold

¹ Samuel Ruhmkorff, "The Incompatibility Problem and Religious Pluralism: Beyond Hick." *Philosophy Compass*, 2013 Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 510-522.

² *Ibid.*, 510-11.

³ *Ibid.*, 511.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 510-11.

that, at least in regards to core doctrine, theirs is the only one religious belief system that is true (exclusivist).⁶ It also refers to people who believe that adherents of other religions may ultimately be saved through the true God, despite their doctrines being incorrect about this true God (*inclusivists*).⁷ An example of this would be people who believe that non-Christians can receive salvation, but if they do, it is still through Christ (even if they do not intend to be saved through Christ).⁸ Confessionalists are distinguishable from pluralists because pluralists do not hold any one religion as uniquely true.⁹

THE INCOMPATIBILITY PROBLEM

Ruhmkorff describes the incompatibility problem in the following way: Religious Pluralism asserts that religions X and Y are both true, but religions X and Y have incompatible beliefs. Because of the principle of non-contradiction, religions with incompatible beliefs cannot both be correct. Therefore, X and Y cannot both be correct.¹⁰ Ruhmkorff moves from here to say that confessionalists also face an incompatibility problem stemming from the incompatible claims of different denominations within religions.

The Argument from Denominational Incompatibility

1. Denominations Q and R have incompatible beliefs.
2. Because of the principle of non-contradiction, Q and R cannot both be true.
3. To assert that just Q or R is true and the other is false brings one dangerously close to a kind of religious solipsism, because it is hard to imagine even two persons in total alignment in their interpretations of doctrinal claims.
4. Therefore, confessionalists must accept that the incompatible denominations are both correct.¹¹

⁶ Ruhmkorff., 510-511.

⁷ Ibid., 511.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ However, religious pluralists do not want to say that all religions are equally true, because they reject evil or immoral religions. The dividing line seems to be, for pluralists, that no religion, among the sufficiently moral religions, is more true than any other. Ibid., 511. This raises a difficult issue as to where one is getting their standard of morality for adjudicating the correctness of religions. Even if the standard comes from some cross-section convergence of religious moralities, why include some religions and exclude others? Gavin D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Religious Studies* 32, no. 02 (June 1996): 223, 226.

¹⁰ Ruhmkorff, 511-512.

¹¹ Ruhmkorff, 512.

Ruhmkorff is quick to say that there is more than meets the eye with both of these incompatibility problems. He proposes a confessionalist's solution to denominational incompatibility, which can be cross-applied to solve a pluralist's incompatibility problem.¹²

The Defense of Denominational Incompatibility

1. Denomination Q is committed to belief set ϕQ and denomination R is committed to belief set ϕR .
2. Belief sets ϕQ and ϕR are incompatible with each other, but there are subsets of beliefs within ϕQ and ϕR , which, if true, are sufficient for the correctness of Q and R (subsets q and r).
3. The truth of the claims in q is sufficient for the correctness of Q.
4. The truth of the claims in r is sufficient for the correctness of R.
5. q and r are compatible.
6. Therefore "Q and R are incompatible, but in a way that does not pose an obstacle to both being correct."¹³

From here, Ruhmkorff goes on to argue that the same argument works for Religious Pluralism. Religions X and Y have incompatible beliefs, but they could have compatible belief subsets sufficient for saying that the religions are both correct.¹⁴

Ruhmkorff predicts that confessionalists may argue that no such compatible subsets of belief exist between religions capable of demonstrating that both religions are correct.¹⁵ He gives the following example, "Confessionalists...may argue that if Buddhism is correct, Christianity is incorrect on the following grounds. If Buddhism is correct, (i) there is not a personal God, and (ii) a fortiori there is not a human who is the incarnation of God – and there is no set of claims whose truth is sufficient for the correctness of Christianity which does not contain (i) or (ii)."¹⁶ Ruhmkorff responds that there can be people who profess themselves as Christians while denying that Jesus was a personal God incarnate, or they can possess an understanding of divine incarnation that is compatible with Buddhism.¹⁷ Ruhmkorff expects that confessionalists would "reject such religious self-identification, but adequate, non-question-begging reasons must be given for doing so."¹⁸ The confessionalist

¹² Ibid., 512-513.

¹³ Ibid., 512.

¹⁴ Ibid., 512-513.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 513.

¹⁸ Ruhmkorff, 513.

Christian is in a bind where she must demonstrate why her definition of Christianity is dispositive. Otherwise, she is unable to prove that Christianity and Buddhism do not contain belief subsets that can show both as correct.

Objections to the Argument from Denominational Incompatibility

Objection 1: Recall premise 3 of the incompatibility problem for denominations:

To assert that just Q or R is true and the other is false brings one dangerously close to a kind of religious solipsism, because it is hard to imagine even two persons in total alignment in their interpretations of doctrinal claims.

Ruhmkorff does not precisely define what religious solipsism is. He does not tell us why it is bad, how ‘close’ we are getting to it or whether that degree of ‘closeness’ is bad. He only says what “leads” to it, which is “the idea that all propositions associated with a denomination need to be true in order for that denomination to be correct.”¹⁹ What he seems to be referring to is a situation where an exclusivist, by asserting only one denomination is correct, is forced via a *reductio ad absurdum* to assert that only their individual understanding of religious doctrine is true. This seems like a non-unique problem for religion, because anytime someone labels a number of propositions true and a number of others false, they come to the conclusion that those who disagree with them on those points are incorrect, and this hardly seems to make one a solipsist. Ruhmkorff himself is arguing that religious pluralism is true, which means that exclusivism and inclusivism are both incorrect by default. Does Ruhmkorff’s own argument lead one into dangerous proximity with religious solipsism? If not, then neither does the confessionalism. If Ruhmkorff’s argument does bring one dangerously close to religious solipsism, then it is self-defeating.

Furthermore, even if religious solipsism is undesirable, that doesn’t necessarily mean that being “dangerously close” to religious solipsism is a terrible thing. Whatever the status of being “dangerously close” to religious solipsism is, it is not religious solipsism itself. Ruhmkorff needs to supply either independent grounds for condemning belief in the correctness of a single denomination, or offer an explanation of why asserting the truth of a single denomination above others will necessarily result in religious solipsism.²⁰

Objection 2: Premise 3 of the incompatibility problem for denominations states that “it is hard to imagine even two persons in total alignment in their

¹⁹ Ibid., 512.

²⁰ He should also define religious solipsism and why it is problematic. I did not find other authors using “religious solipsism” the way that Ruhmkorff does, and applying a strict definition of solipsism in its place does not seem to make sense in the context of his paper.

interpretations of doctrinal claims.” Even assuming “religious solipsism” is a coherent concept and concrete worry, it is not nearly as difficult as Ruhmkorff proposes for two persons to be in total alignment on doctrinal claims. It is common for denominations or individual churches to have statements of faith that are considered authoritative.²¹ Now, it is easy for one to bring up examples of people arguing over the correct interpretation of certain creeds. However, all it takes for two or more persons to be in theological agreement with another is for a person to believe whatever their pastor or priest says is true. Or, people could meet and discuss divergent interpretations of doctrine before arriving at an agreement. This seems far from impossible; I can think of personal examples of people with whom I am in theological agreement. So it would seem that merely more than one person agreeing to a single religious creed could avoid Ruhmkorff’s dangerous road to religious solipsism.

Furthermore, one must consider not just complete agreement on doctrine, but also agreement on priority within doctrine. For example, if one considers one set of beliefs to be incontestable (say a common evangelical formulation of the authority of scripture, personal conversion, salvation only through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that Christians need to seek to actively evangelize others)²² and hold other beliefs to be contestable (like eschatology, dispensationalism, or the nature of ordinances) then even if those people disagree on contestable issues, they have a superseding agreement that those issues are allowed to be contested. Two persons can agree on what truths are non-negotiable while at the same time maintaining that other points of theology are contestable as true or false.²³ Holding a hierarchy of beliefs allows for the confessionalist to be exclusivist to other religions (for example they could say denying the resurrection excludes one from fellowship with God) and inclusivist in regards to other denominations (for example they could say that faith in the resurrection, though held alongside other incorrect beliefs, is sufficient for fellowship with God). So it

²¹ The Reformed Church of America posts a number of creeds, confessions, and catechisms that are authoritative for their member churches. (“Creeds and Confessions,” Reformed Church in America, <https://www.rca.org/rca-basics/creeds-and-confessions>.) Nondenominational autonomous churches will often have statements of faith to instruct their members.

²² Richard Kyle, *Evangelicalism: an Americanized Christianity* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Routledge, 2006), 11.

²³ Perhaps ‘religious solipsism’ is being argued for as a necessary conclusion on the basis that there is a subjective element to belief wherein no two people could be said to believe anything in the exact same way, because there is no way to verify that they subjectively experience that belief in the same way. This seems to be a discussion beyond the scope of this paper and something that would also pose a problem for religious pluralists who still want to say certain beliefs are either true or false. Further, statements like there is one God or Jesus rose from the dead seem to be yes or no questions rather than particularly subjective ones.

seems even more plausible for people to have “total agreement” when they agree agreed on incontestable truths and agree to allow disagreement over nonessentials.

Objections to the Defense of Denominational Incompatibility

Objection 1: Premises 2-5 of the defense of denominational incompatibility propose that denominations have independent subsets of belief that are compatible with each other and serve to validate the separate denominations. This, however, is not an accurate representation of how unifying subsets operate across denominational lines. Rather than premise 4’s characterization that ϕQ and ϕR possess their own subsets (q and r) that are sufficient for the correctness of the denominations, the confessionalist will declare that there is one subset (s) that is sufficient for the correctness of the denominations. The subset “ s ” will contain truth claims held in common between ϕQ and ϕR that are determined to be essential truth claims within the denomination. For example, the Presbyterian may say that the Baptist is wrong when it comes to infant baptism, but correct when it comes to the core doctrines of the Trinity, scriptural authority, and the gospel (Christ’s incarnation, death, burial, resurrection). Both the Presbyterian and the Baptist will believe in these core doctrines, and each could agree that those core doctrines supersede, in terms of importance, over lesser beliefs.²⁴

Referring to a single subset of beliefs shared across denominations also better captures how confessionalists validate different denominations. The singular subset, as referred to early in the paper, could be truths deemed “essential” for the denomination to be correct. Integral in this analysis is not just quantifying how many true statements the denomination makes, but also qualitatively weighing them.²⁵ A classic plea for denominational unity in

²⁴ Not every branch of Presbyterianism or every Baptist denomination will agree on all of these doctrines, but a number of them will. Confer: the Presbyterian Church of America statement of faith (<https://www.pcanet.org/beliefs/>) and the Southern Baptist Confession statement of faith (<http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/basicbeliefs.asp>).

²⁵ Who is doing the weighing? The confessionalists, because Ruhmkorff’s argument purports to give a confessionalist defense to incompatible denominations and then cross-apply it to pluralists. For this to work, then the argument should accurately portray how confessionalists weigh beliefs, and confessionalists tend to ascribe to some form of authoritative confession. This side steps the issue of question begging because the argument isn’t so much about who gets to define “Christianity” in general but about how confessionalists describe their Christianity, and the rationality of their particular approach to their Christianity and other faiths/christianities (same could be said for confessionalists Muslims, or Jews, and so on). This will come up again at the end of the paper under the subheading “A Defense to Ruhmkorff’s Begging the Question Objection.” Additionally, both the pluralist and the confessionalist are interested in doing qualitative and not just numeric consideration of beliefs, otherwise, given just how many possible differences there

Christianity is: “unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and charity in all things.”²⁶ “Essentials” comprise the non-negotiable truth claims that supersede the less clear and more negotiable non-essentials. This distinction is important in terms of religious traditions and how they classify orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and heresy.²⁷ It also acknowledges the systematic nature of theology held by many religious groups, wherein some beliefs become foundational building blocks of the faith and supersede less important beliefs. Christian theologians, in times past, have built their systematic theology on the doctrinal cornerstones of the Trinity²⁸ or the resurrection.²⁹ Foundational beliefs (the core, validating subset) set the boundaries for in-group theological debate over the non-essential beliefs. In the qualitative analysis of what makes a denomination mostly true, the foundational beliefs weigh the heaviest.³⁰

are between denominations based on theological minutia, it could be hard to assert any subset as being sufficient for the correctness of a given belief system.

²⁶ Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: the Story of the American Restoration Movement*, Revised ed. (Joplin, MO: College Pr Pub Co, 1994), 33; James T. Bretzke SJ, *Consecrated Phrases: a Latin Theological Dictionary; Latin Expressions Commonly Found in Theological Writings Third Edition*, Bilingual ed. (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2013), 105; Gleider I. Hernández, *The International Court of Justice and the Judicial Function* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 200; , The Apostle Paul also struck a balance between making absolute truth claims and at other times recognizes humanity’s conceptual limitations, see: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13, 15:3-20.

²⁷ Andrew Stephen Damick, *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy: Exploring Belief Systems through the Lens Off the Ancient Christian Faith* (Chesterton, Ind: Conciliar Press, 2011), 13, 15; Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 155; Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, *New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 230-231

²⁸ Peter S. Oh, *Karl Barth's Trinitarian Theology: A Study in Karl Barth's Analogical Use of the Trinitarian Relation* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), ix-xi.

²⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus, God and Man*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).

³⁰ I do not mean to imply that moral obligations are not integral to confessional faith, but they are built upon the foundational beliefs in an orthodox system: Morality is real because God is real; “we love [Christ] because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19); the authority of scripture is predicated on God’s revelation through Christ (see Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1, “Of the Holy Scripture”); http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/; the reality of the resurrection authenticates the gospel (see 1 Cor 15:12-15); consider the hierarchy of authority in the teaching of the Catholic church (see “On the Papacy and the Teaching Office of the Church,” Catholic Education Resource Center, accessed December 08, 2017, <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/on-the-papacy-and-the-teaching-office-of-the-church.html>).

Revised Defense of Denominational Incompatibility

With these observations in mind, the denominational incompatibility defense can be reformulated in the following way:

1. Denomination Q is committed to belief set ϕQ and denomination R is committed to belief set ϕR .
2. Belief sets ϕQ and ϕR are incompatible with each other; they contain differences.
3. But there is a subset of beliefs within ϕQ and ϕR , which, if true, are sufficient for the correctness of Q and R (subset “s”).
4. the truth of the claims in s is sufficient for the correctness of Q
5. the truth of the claims in s is sufficient for the correctness of R
6. Therefore, Q and R are incompatible, but in a way that does not pose an obstacle to both being correct.

Now, a very important step to determining whether or not the religious pluralist can adopt this argument formulation is to examine what is meant by “correct” in the context of the denominational argument. Ruhmkorff himself acknowledges that there is a difference in the way exclusivists and pluralists deem a religion as correct.³¹ “Exclusivists take the correctness of a religion to mean that it makes mostly true claims about the transcendent while some pluralists have a sense of correctness that allows that a religion can be acknowledged as correct without making many or even any claims about the transcendent that are known to be true.”³² Pluralists could, for example, reject the principle of non-contradiction, or say that there is no God’s eye view of truth, or contest that incompatible religious claims can be “noumenally false” but “phenomenally true,” or say that each religion is correct if it reaches its “soteriological goal.”³³ But for the confessionalist solution of incompatibility to work for pluralists, it must conclude with a definition of correctness consistent with how the word functions for confessionalists; the pluralist must follow the premises to a conclusion of correctness that can function in both a confessionalist and pluralist framework. Otherwise, the pluralist is simply running a different argument, and not demonstrating a way that the same argument solves for both forms of incompatibility. The confessionalist grants the principle of non-contradiction and concludes that two different bodies of thought can “make mostly true claims about the transcendent” while not completely agreeing with each other. If that is how the term “correct” functions in the argument, then the religious pluralist using the argument is arguing with that notion of correctness, and likewise assuming the principle of non-contradiction.

³¹ Ruhmkorff, 510-511.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 512-513.

This notion of correctness shouldn't be alien to religious pluralism either because, as Gavin D'Costa and others have pointed out, religious pluralists still make moral judgments.³⁴ They deem some religions to be more morally true than others. The pluralist, for example, would be inclined to say that the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany has greater moral validity than the German Christians (a group that tried to harmonize Nazism and Christianity).³⁵

A consequence of the pluralist adopting this denominational compatibility argument then, is if they succeed, they succeed as confessionalists, not pluralists. They solve for incompatibility by offering a subset of belief, which applies across religions, that is dispositive of the faith's correctness. Here, the pluralist becomes a confessionalist by either asserting a form of exclusivism or inclusivism. Asserting that an essential belief set is required to validate the truth of a religion has the pluralist play the role of an exclusivist. Asserting that a necessary subset (typically regarding moral observance) is required for the soteriological goal³⁶ (some kind of union with the divine) of a religion, has the pluralist acting as an inclusivist, because ultimately it is the pluralist's conception of divinity and morality that is true, and a person's fulfillment of a proper divine-human relationship that results in salvation.³⁷ One could object to this characterization and say that the pluralist does not assert the truth of their own religion, instead asserting a cross-section of truths pulled from various religions. However, the pluralist still excludes some religions in its calculus and needs to explain why it prefers some religious moralities over others.³⁸ Furthermore, a synthesis of two different religious belief sets, so long as it excludes at least one belief from either original set, ends up forming a belief set that is different than each prior set.³⁹

A hypothetical can be helpful to illustrate this point. Let's say there are two religions: the Church of the Peanut Butter & Jelly (PB&J) and the Church of the Ham & Swiss (H&S). The Church of PB&J holds to the essential doctrines that two pieces of bread, peanut butter, and jelly, are all required for achieving its salvific goal (obtaining the best possible lunch). The essential ingredients of a PB&J sandwich are non-negotiable, grounding truths. PB&J communities, however, use different kinds of bread, peanut butter, and jelly, and may have robust debates over which choices are superior. This level of disagreement,

³⁴ D'Costa, 226.

³⁵ Ibid; Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted cross: the German Christian movement in the Third Reich*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996, 160, 166.

³⁶ Ruhmkorff, 513-514; D'Costa, 226.

³⁷ This notion most closely fits "pragmatic pluralists" as defined by Ruhmkorff. (Ruhmkorff, 512-513, 518.)

³⁸ Ruhmkorff, 511; D'Costa 223, 226.

³⁹ In dialectical terms: Thesis and antithesis merge to create a synthesis, but the synthesis ≠ thesis or antithesis.

however, is allowable in non-core doctrine. Having bread, peanut butter, and jelly are all considered equally important, and room is left for variation within those categories. The Church of Ham & Swiss holds to the essential ingredients of two pieces of bread, ham, and Swiss cheese. The H&S church has virtually the same salvific goal as PB&J, and likewise allows for debates over the best kinds of bread, ham, and swiss cheese. One day, another party comes along, observes both of these religions and has an epiphany. He founds the Church of Any Ol' Sandwich (AOS) and approaches the leaders of the two prior churches and says, “guys, you’re both right, salvation is the best lunch possible and the best lunch possible is obtained through having a sandwich.” Upon review, PB&J and H&S both reject AOS, because, while trying to synthesize their beliefs, it has rejected central doctrine of each. Peanut butter, jelly, ham, and swiss all transfer from being foundations to attachments—from essentials to options. It’s hard to see how PB&J or H&S can be “mostly true” when their beliefs are not quantitatively mostly true, or qualitatively mostly true. AOS has not mutually validated each religion; it has only validated the parts of each that fit its own conception of religious truth. Its fellow sandwich religions will be saved not because their religions are correct about reality, but because AOS is correct.⁴⁰

A Defense to Ruhmkorff’s Begging the Question Objection

Lastly, I will address Ruhmkorff’s “question-begging” objection to labeling beliefs “essential” within a religion.⁴¹ It is not the case that a confessionalist must affirm the truth of every denomination within its religion. People who self-identify as Christian, but reject beliefs that the majority of Christian theologies would consider foundational, are not particularly relevant to this case. The denominational incompatibility arguments is being addressed at confessionalists, not Christian pluralists. The incompatibility argument is about the logical coherence of taking a particular position on religious truth, and the confessionalist need only be precise as to what “Christianities,” “Islams,” or “Judiaisms” she is defending. The exclusivist Christian can apply the qualifiers of “confessional” or “orthodox” in order to identify the version of Christianity that she is holding to be true. Therefore, Ruhmkorff’s question-begging objection appears to be a red-herring to the overall argument about the logical coherence of an exclusivist stance.

⁴⁰ The AOS church here is meant to illustrate pluralists and their attempt to use an authoritative belief subset to assert two religions are correct. It results in the pluralist becoming more an inclusivist than anything else.

⁴¹ Ruhmkorff, 513.

CONCLUSION

Ruhmkorff's argument that confessionalists must employ a belief-subsets argument to resolve their own incompatibility problem, and that the argument is equally accessible to Religious pluralists, is faulty. Confessionalists can assert that one denomination is true and others are false, and to do so does not necessarily implicate the acceptance of a form of religious solipsism. Ruhmkorff's 'Confessionalist defense to incompatibility' is ill-structured, because the confessionalist asserts a dispositive truth subset, not truth subsets. When the pluralist runs through the subset argument, they end up reaching a conclusion akin to Confessionalism, not pluralism, because they too assert a correct subset rather than separate mutually correct subsets. Lastly, saying that the definitions of essential beliefs for a religion is question-begging is not very pertinent to this discussion, which specifically addresses the logical coherence of confessionalist theologies.

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