

Understanding Interreligious Dialogue as a Response to Religious Pluralism: Insights through Examples from India

"I see God in every human being."

-Mother Teresa

"Religions are different roads converging upon the same point. What does it matter if we take different roads to reach the same goal!"

-Mahatma Gandhi

Abstract-

Philosophy of Religions and Theology is continually warranted by the Divine revelations and is informed by historical consciousness that shapes our understanding of life, death, and everything in between and after. Questions of metaphysical truth and epistemological correctness have dominated the discourse of both these fields. In the spring of absoluteness of knowledge and power that operated within the horizons of Judaeo-Christian traditions, John Harwood Hick in the clearest voices offered a schema for the composition and interpretation of ideologies that rejected the claims of "the only" or the "highest order" of religious thought. There is no single overarching monopolist meaning imposed by religion within the mainstream religions themselves when it comes to religious pluralism. There are several meanings of social realities and multiplicities of religious interpretations and theological doctrines. In this essay, we shall examine three interconnected questions- i) how interreligious dialogue is grounded in the principles of religious pluralism; ii) how the scholarship and activities within (IRD) are implicit responses to this typology; and iii) two brief examples from India that attest to the aforementioned. This work necessarily works within the constraints of time and the chosen limits of scope in comprehending the typology and interfaith dialogue.

Introduction

After the Second World War, there was an explosion of information, and an inevitable quest for the understanding of philosophy of religion and ideological effects of the phenomenology of religion was at its forever high. The religious beliefs and religiosity of people took central stage in the social lives of people, and they consciously began to explore and challenge the religious thoughts that influenced their everyday lives. Within the theological dictum, there then came a wave of theorizing what Alan Race (2008) termed “classical typologies” that categorised several ideological viewpoints with regards to understanding one’s own religion in relation to the others. The three-fold schema were foundationally “Christian responses to the differing worldviews on religious schools of thought encompassing questions of salvation and truth” (D’Costa 1996: 223). Exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism formed the three-tier typology that continues to influence theological discussions, and has significantly shaped the scholarship on interreligious dialogue. Traditionally, pluralism was viewed as polar opposite to exclusivism, where the latter was associated with exclusive truth claims, and that the path to salvation is uniquely Christian. While the exclusivists symbolised standards for religiously committed to the cause of following Jesus, the pluralists developed the epistemologically determined approaches that challenged these exclusivist orientations. To define, argue or to side with any category is not within the scope of this essay; rather, the attempt is to negotiate how pluralism, no matter the demonstrated tendencies of this typology to appear as “superficial” (Netland 2001: 68) and “logically a form of exclusivism” (D’Costa 1996: 223), it still is “necessary” (Hedges and Race, 2008) for interreligious understanding and coexistence. And to substantiate this pluralistic position, I shall elucidate with some examples from India.

Coward (1987) and Wuthnow (2011) postulated that religious diversity in India helped in the development of pluralism, where the latter was a response to the flourishing diversity. The funeral of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mother Teresa in September 1997 was a momentous exhibit to understand India and religious pluralism- it brought together faith and community leaders who performed the last rites of Mother Teresa in their own customs. Mother Teresa, despite being of the Christian faith tradition, was embraced and revered not just during her life, but even after that because there was a “willingness to fade the social and religious boundaries” (Wuthnow 2005: 181). Mahatma Gandhi started the

first multilingual newspaper in the world called the 'Indian opinion' to promote the cause of religious and linguistic pluralism. In times where interreligious dialogue is gaining momentum, such exemplars make way for allowing the comprehension of religious pluralism in the light of a binding catalyst that facilitates multiplicity of beliefs and constructive dialogue. Hick and Knitter (1987) argue that, "India as a civilization add meaning and content to the idea of pluralism in a way that it tolerates the label of multicultural encounters that can lead to the creation of new communities, myths and languages; thereby the pluralism becoming an answer to fascism" (Hick and Knitter 1987: 73).

Pluralism and Interreligious Dialogue

Understanding plurality and its implication on theological and philosophical consciousness invites the need to assess the historical and sociological circumstances, but given the chosen limits this essay necessarily operates under, we shall discuss the contemporary situation of the need to ground interreligious engagements in pluralistic notions. In accordance to Hedges (2010), John Hick certainly pre-encoded and determined the narrowing down of differences among different religions, but did not give his readers enough reasons to embrace this idea of his. While D'Costa and Race supporters of this postulate, I tend to have a detracted concurrence with them. In principle, the contradiction occurs because Hick's hypotheses qualify for a special consideration where he dogmatically argues that the core structure of all religions is similar, if not the same.

John Hick initially was a Presbyterian exclusivist who believed in the tenets of religious exclusivism until he encountered people of different faith backgrounds where he often felt challenged to reconcile the social realities with exclusivist thinking. It was this dilemma that led him to propose pluralism as the compatible way ahead and he called this transcendental reality as "the Real". This understanding of Real lends itself to the theorising of Wittgenstein's "seeing-as" as a form of religious experience. For Hick (1985), religious pluralism is the dispositional response to the radical readiness to the problems of existential realities (Hick 1985: 29). Heim (1995) and Safi (2003) are of the view that pluralism does not just signify tolerance, rather it is "an active attempt of understanding the other". The

genesis and discourse of pluralism profoundly makes space for the other to coexist, hence is positively correlated with the progress of interreligious dialogue. Hick convincingly propounds that inter-faith dialogue should be the mutual mission of all religions, and religious pluralism can help in encouraging and helping people to appreciate the differences in who they label as the Other. Tracy (1990) in his studies of locating the position of “the other” in interreligious dialogue suggests that the first lesson any person involved in dialogue learns that his/her knowledge of the other is extremely limited. This he referred to as the “chaos of contemporary theology” (Tracy 1981: xvi). The chaos occurs because those who commit themselves to a single truth claim or a single method of reaching that truth attack all other who refuse to follow this unitary path. For him, this chaos mandates the need to develop a new “culture of pluralism” that offer new philosophies and new ethical systems. Tracy draws upon Hick’s pluralism to engage in the understanding of interreligious dialogue because he is convinced that the only way to demystify the western Christian superiority is to lay grounds for accepting more than one truth and understand the meaningfulness of those truths.

Omid Safi (2003) argued that pluralism is imperative not just to understand the other better in the discourse of interfaith dialogue, but the development of a religion itself is grounded in the agency of conversing with the others and attempting to understanding “them” and ourselves in the light of one another’s theological commitments. Sterkens (2001) sides with Hick’s pluralism because he believes that it provides for a working model to engage in interfaith dialogue. “According to Hick, every religion contains the necessary elements to arrive at a self-understanding that allows for the pluralistic context” (Sterkens 2001: 58). D’Costa’s primary criticism of Hick was that the latter trivialises differences and underplays the need to acknowledge those differences among religions and promotes homogeneity even when the differences are obvious and explicitly exist. He famously uses the example of the term *bhakti* in Hindu tradition and argues how it will always be different from worship or devotion. Hick clarified that, ““The religious life of humanity will no doubt continue to be lived within the existing traditions, though with less and less emphasis upon their mutually exclusive claims, but this by no means endeavours to dismiss differences among religions ” (Hick 1989: 379).

Barnes and Barnes (2002) argue that pluralism as a typology may have its limitations, but when applied pedagogically and heuristically on the front of dialogue, it has its merits. They propose to perceive pluralism as a model that relativises religious traditions while not diffusing the differences or making sweeping generalisations. Hinnells (2002) called Hick's pluralism as the "normative pluralism" which on closer examinations has the potential to cut through the complexities and hidden predispositions of other 'isms' and can serve as the "common core" in the domain of interfaith dialogue. While the central idea of pluralism remains systematically lucid, the meanings derived from its explanations and the manner in which it is transformed to praxis vary greatly. Socrates, one of the most ancient thinkers to delineate dialogue had stated that dialogue presumes the idea that the participants operate under the assumption that they have agreed to recognise and discuss a common subject matter. However, the meanings attached to and drawn from that subject matter under consideration is individually discerned. Building on this notion, Hick argued that "truth through dialogue" can only have merit when the participants choose not to impose their understanding and meaningfulness of the issue onto others.

Todorov (1992) interestingly explored the realm of what constitutes "the other" and categorised it. His categorisations prove to be useful in understanding the "religious other". He proposed that there are three kinds of other- i) the inner other (it is within our own self), ii) the interior other (within our own community), and iii) the exterior other (outside our community). In assessing religious pluralism, we find that we are engaging with the third category of the other. For Heim (1998), pluralism is satisfactorily instituted only when it is viewed from the prism of experiences of people from "other religion". The new wave of interreligious dialogue necessarily focuses on the "other" however slow in coming. Heim reinstated that pluralism in the discourse of dialogue was essentially of the following three kinds- i) pluralism of religions, ii) pluralism within Christianity, and iii) a pluralism of responses to the aforementioned pluralisms (Heim 1998: 221). In the light of interreligious dialogue, a theology of pluralism constitutes the heart of conversations (Taber, 1993).

Limitations to the Interpretations of Religious Pluralism

Having established that indeed religious pluralism is a welcomed prerequisite in the algorithm of interreligious dialogue, it is not bereft of limitations that continue to throw challenges at scholars and practitioners of dialogue. Phan's (2015) gravest criticism of religious pluralism, particularly Hick's model, was that it was a western construct, and Hick wrote about circumventing generalisations and ended up universalising his own theories. Phan argued that the eastern societies perceive the "other" in quite a contrast to the west, and understanding pluralism in the east requires an alternative tool-set. Another serious difficulty of Hick's pluralism is that he often failed to acknowledge the fuzzy edges of an individual's access to the truth versus the tradition's access to the truth. Knitter (2014) raised his concern about Hick dismissing the agency invested in individuals and overvaluing the power of a community. Heim charges Hick of falling prey to metacritique and wrote that "religious pluralism is not plurality at all" when religions tend to respond in similar ways (Heim 1995: 123). Pluralism is often touted as the domain of the "liberals" and the "conservatives" are accused of being parochial, but in reality pluralism too is exclusivist in its approach (Markham, 2009). Most severe evaluations of Hick's pluralism probably came from Gavin D'Costa who challenged the idea of viewing the other through their lens. D'Costa questioned the pragmatism and accuracy of this postulate. He advanced his counter-arguments by arguing that the one requires curtailed grades and categories to distinguish religions in order to locate the implications of religious pluralism. The categorisation as per D'Costa (1987) leaves a sense of exclusivism. Hick (1997) was prompted to respond to D'Costa's critique and he counter-stated that pluralism is a meta-theory and even if it categorises, the "intent" is what sets it as polar opposite to exclusivism. While Hedges (2010) sincerely suggested that pluralism is important and is needed in today's communal lives, his critique of Hicks was that beside the need to understand the experiential reflections of others, Hick's model of pluralism tried to "prove a little too much" (Hedges 2010: 128). In my opinion, Hick is right in underscoring the effect of the intent of the different typologies, and his theory certainly provides space not just for interfaith dialogue but offers potential solutions to epistemological violence concerning truth claims.

Examples of Embracing Religious Pluralism and its Consequence of Interfaith Dialogue from India

The premise of intercultural and interfaith exchanges in India has for long implicitly worked along the lines of pluralism. In this segment, we shall discuss two examples of interfaith engagement in India that positively correlates with embracing religious pluralism.

i) The festival of Kumbh or indigenously called “the Kumbh Mela”

Allahabad, recently named Prayagraj, in Uttar Pradesh hosts this fair which is popular worldwide for being the largest religious gathering across the globe. Despite this being a celebration for Hindu pilgrimage where people of this community gathers to bathe (*shahi snan*) in the sacred Ganges to get rid of their sins, this makes for an ideal setting to examine positive interreligious exchanges. Maclean (2008) in his studies of understanding the politics and power of pilgrimage was highly influenced by the Hindu-Muslim cultural exchanges at the fair, in spite of the communal tensions that are not uncommon in that region. He revealed that people of non-Hindu faith traditions participated in the *mela* not just as visitors, but as devotees, as volunteers and as administrative and security officers (Maclean 2008: 123). He pens down that as a Christian westerner, he finds it “ironic” how a Hindu pilgrimage fest welcomes even Christian missionaries and how a religious festival epitomises religious diversity (Maclean 2008: 105). Panikkar (1999) argued that religious encounters in India qualify for a unique sort of religious rhetoric where the religious attitudes and models act as metaphors for renouncing absolutism. Supporting the cause of pluralism in intrafaith and by pragmatic extension, interfaith dialogue, Pannikar asserts that, “pluralism provides the ideal way of communication that helps to bridge the gulf of mutual ignorance and misunderstandings of different cultures” (Pannikar 1999: 10). Bryant (2002) who was a student of Pannikar admits that he was thoroughly confused about the intercultural exchanges in India until he witnessed it himself. In his work *Dialogue at/with the Kumbh Mela*, he recounts how the Kumbh Mela offered an “ideal opportunity” to study dialogue (Bryant 2002: 28). He underscores the fact that a Hindu pilgrimage festival brings together millions of non-Hindu people as well, and that itself is pluralism lived well.

Only recently has the Kumbh mela of 2019 began, and one of the most outstanding examples of interfaith dialogue is a 76 year old Mullah – Mohammed Mehmood lighting up

the fair. Over three decades, this man travels more than 800 Kilometres to set up the lighting arrangement of the fair. In his own words, “the sandhus (Hindu priests) make me feel at home” (Times Now, 14th January 2019). He also shared that he has never missed a single Kumbh mela since 1986 and his name or identity has never been a source of contention in him attending this festival. Another applied example of pluralism and interfaith dialogue via the Kumbh congregation is the religious leaders from different faith traditions pledging to spread the message of healthy sanitation and keeping the environment green by avoiding the use of plastic during the meet, which is expected to gather over 100 million people (India Times, 13th January 2019).

ii) Khera Sadhan, a small village near Agra

Khera Sadhan is a village near Agra where the Hindus and Muslims are a part of joint families! Sury Pullat (2014), one of the very few researchers who have studied this peculiar phenomenon describes that it is both fascinating and frustrating to discuss his findings in his book *Destined Encounters*- Fascinating because among the big tales of communal rites and tensions, this village is a ray of hope; and frustrating because this place has not been studied other than some scanty news reports. He says that “Love-Jihad is a misnomer” in this place because both Hindus and Muslims are part of the same family as a custom of interfaith marriages. Historically, the reason behind this is that during the rule of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707), all the villagers were forcefully converted to Islam, and when failed to do so, they were banished from the village. Post-independence, the community and faith leaders exhorted the villagers to return to their indigenous faith systems, but very few people did. Since then, pluralism has been their religion- whereby, they have incorporated the values and structural realities from both the traditions.

The current headman of the village has a Hindu father, and a Muslim mother, his sister fasts weekly following a Hindu God and is married to a Muslim man. In Khera Sadhan, those who follow Islam go to Temples and those who are Hindus visit the mosque as well. (Times of India, 12th September 2014). Eid and Diwali both are celebrated with equal zeal and joy. There are instances where a *Niqah* is held in a temple, and the Hindu priest officiates the ceremonies. Pullat (2014) argues that though this village has adopted a unique model of pluralism, there is no denying that it highlights the aspect of accommodating

“others” and exposes the conflict management strategy of pluralism (Pullat 2014: 113). Margaret Chatterjee in her analysis of religious pluralism in the Indian context explains that the pluralistic model operates on two-fold foundational principles- i) assimilation; and ii) water-tight compartment response. The former means that different characteristics of other traditions are incorporated, and the latter implies that sometimes the responses to many intercultural interactions are safely secured within the community itself, instead of aggressive confrontations (Chatterjee 1994: 2). Aleaz (2008) and later Hedges (2010) in their reflections on pluralism and India wrote that the culture in India is integrated and religion-culture complex is such that it is almost impossible to isolate one from the other. Therefore, this favours and facilitates intercultural and interfaith engagements.

Conclusions

There is no denying that the foundational principles and dogmatic interpretations of most religions, when taken literally and witnessed in practice seem quite incompatible with one another. The claims of Truth and the paths to Salvation are normatively used to define and characterise Christianity and the manner in which it is performed with regards to other faith traditions. Little can be accurately told about the precise emergence of religious pluralism, but what seems to be a consensus that it rose as a response to the previously popular typologies and the influence of the Church. Hick’s proposition of religious pluralism is sometimes associated with the label of “reformed epistemological typology” (Plantinga, 1983). Religious pluralism provides opportunities to indeed pervasively explore the key issues surrounding religions and the encompassing diversities. Pluralism almost inevitably becomes the response to acknowledging diversity. It brings to the fore the significance of relativism. As Runzo (1988) asserts, all Hick tried to do was to showcase that conflicting truth claims too could be viewed as set of truths- there is truth beyond our perceived truth claims- and that is where the matter rests. Pluralism endeavours to put forth that more than one truth and more than one theistic tradition not only exist but that their tenets are well capable of being justified (Byrne, 2011). In contemporary times where communal unrest is one of the leading causes of global challenges, it is only right to give pluralism a chance.

India has often been studied for its pluralistic society, however, it is unfortunate that not a single day passes by without some new reports on incidents that disrupt communal harmony. On one end there are several examples of peaceful interfaith coexistence, and on the other end there are cases that exhibit the tensions of maintaining a coherent society. Interfaith dialogue necessarily is enriched by sharing experiences and by frequent interactions with the “other”. Mostly in the past we have tried to *explain* the other with regards to ourselves. It is important to shift our perspective and attempt to *understand* the other. It is not irrational for scholars like Markham (2009) to brand interfaith dictum as an exclusivist bubble. Invalidating any person’s opinions will dilute the overall objective of interfaith dialogue. In times to come, we shall exhort the participation of those who are not keen supporters of dialogue, and include their viewpoints to broaden our horizons of understanding.

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