

One revelation in different religions

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Within the human history, without exception, every religion claims that its revelation is true. Some of the followers of different religions postulate only their own religion reveals the truth. This raises a question for the possibility of one revelation in different religions or it could exist only in one particular religion. To respond this question, this paper first explores the definition of revelation by examining its characters and function. Secondly, from the theological and philosophical perspective, it discusses the rationality of one revelation within different religions with the religious pluralist point of view. Thirdly, we will examine the essential content and purpose of revelation by exploring the similarity in the sacred scripts of different religions.

Referring to Encyclopaedia Britannica, the definition of revelation, in religion, is “the disclosure of divine or sacred reality or purpose to humanity. In the religious view, such disclosure may come through mystical insights, historical events, or spiritual experiences that transform the lives of individuals and groups.”¹ More specifically, Keith Ward defines the meaning of revelation as a Divine communication, Keith claims:

Revelation, ... in a preliminary way, is a Divine communication shaped by the interests and values of a particular society at a particular time. Its ultimate content is the existence and nature of a suprasensory good, a final goal of supreme worth.²

According to Keith's definition, Divine revelation has two important features. Firstly, the Divine communication depends on human interests and values which varies in people, time and place. The second feature is that the purpose of Divine communications is to reveal the essential Divine spirit. By giving the definition of revelation, it implies that, although there exist many different doctrines and spiritual disciples in many religions in according to specific historical and environmental constraints, revelation may share the same function within different traditions. For example, in Buddhism, the monastic rules, the philosophic schools and the Bodhisattvas all function as instruments of enlightenment in Buddhism. The Dharma teaching serves as the ‘boat’ which help people cross the river of karma-samsara from the land of suffering to the other side of enlightenment. Another example, in Hinduism, Brahman is reached by the ‘ladder’ of the Vedas. Similarly, scripture in the Western religions functions as the instrument or means by which God is revealed.

¹Encyclopedia Britannica, *Revelation in Religion* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/revelation>, 8 February 2018.

² Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p.24

Although the Western religions vary in their doctrine and ways of practice, each religion employs these as the means by which the one God is responded to, give grace and is known. By understanding the core of the various religions' revelation is a collection of instrumental means by which the One may be reached, each religion should not be treated as the only one which reveals the true religion but rather as one of the instruments which help people transform themselves from self-centeredness to Real-centeredness.

Although revelation from various religions may share the same instrumental function, there are many conflicts among different belief-systems developed from the great world faiths, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and so on. For example, some of the ultimate are personal, and others are non-personal. One may ask whether there is more than one belief could reflect reality within the different belief systems. In responding to this question, John Hick provides a series of analogies to justify not only one religion can give revelation. One of the analogies is the wave-particle complementarity in physics. The properties observed of light, which is wave-like properties or particle-like properties, depending upon related acts of the observer. Henry Folse interprets this ontology and comments, "characterizes physical objects through their powers to appear in different phenomenal manifestations rather than through determinate properties corresponding to those of phenomenal objects as was in the classical framework".³ Similarly, the revelation which has different forms is related to people with different traditions and cultures and kinds of spiritual practice.

But why the different human responses in the great world religions could point to the same Real? The ground reason which John gives to us is that the Real itself is ineffable, in other words, the Real lies beyond the range of the human conceptual system. By quoting from the great traditions, John Hick claims:

Within Hinduism, the Upanishads say of Brahman, 'There the eye goes not, speech goes not, nor the mind', and that Brahman is that 'before which words recoil, and to which no understanding has ever attained ... From Sikhism, 'By thinking I cannot obtain a conception of Him, even though I think hundreds of times'. The Tao Te Ching declares that 'The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao'. Within Buddhism ultimate reality is referred to, within the Mahayana tradition, as sunyata, emptiness. As D.T. Suzuki explains, 'To say that reality is "empty" means that it goes beyond definability, and cannot be qualified as this or that' ... Within the mystical strands of Judaism and Islam, En Sof, the Infinite, and al-Haqq, the Real, are beyond all human thought forms. And within Christianity, in the

³ Henry Folse, *The Philosophy of Niels Bohr: The Framework of Complementarity* (New York: North Holland, 1985), p.237

early period Gregory of Nyssa wrote that God is ‘incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and all supramundane intelligence, unthinkable, unutterable, above all expression in words’... Indeed, I think we can say that all serious religious thought affirms that the Ultimate, in its infinite divine reality, is utterly beyond our comprehension.⁴

Knowing the Real is ineffable, the religious experience could not be a pure projection. Instead, it is the only “human response to a transcendent reality”. As a result, according to John, the Real can be distinguished in “Real in itself and Real as experienced”. The real as a reality lying “outside the scope of our human conceptual systems”. In addition, John Hick suggests:

The ultimate ineffable Reality is capable of being authentically experienced in terms of different sets of human concepts, as Jahweh, as the Holy Trinity, as Allah, as Brahman, as Dharmakaya, and so on, these different personae and impersonae occurring at the interface between the Real and our differing religious mentalities and cultures.⁵

Although it is impossible to describe the Real-in-itself, this ultimate Real can be experienced with people in different great world traditions. Within some traditions, the Real is known as personal and from within others as nonpersonal. This is “the ground of all human transformation from unhappy self-centeredness to the blessedness that is variously thought and experienced in this life as an eternal quality of life/ as peace with God/ as nirvana/ as satori/ as moksha, and beyond this life in ways beyond our present imagining.”⁶

The logic that a source of reality is experienced in a plurality of ways is both the oldest and the most contemporary explanation of religious pluralism. In Hinduism, the Vedic notion of the One is called by many names. For Buddhism, the causal law of karma is the one reality with which all the phenomenon could be explained. Judaism, Christianity and Islam share the perception of all peoples and nations as under the one God. Besides John Hick, there are other contemporary scholars of religions (e.g. Karl Jaspers⁷, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith⁸) adopt this logic, as do current thinkers in each

⁴ John, Hick. *The Rainbow of Faith: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1995) p.57-8

⁵ Ibid, p.25

⁶ Ibid. p.28

⁷ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “The Christian in a Religiously Plural World”, in *Religious Diversity*, ed. W. Oxtoby (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p.9

⁸ John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973).

of these religions.

On the other hand, Karl Barth asserts: "There is a true religion ... we need have no hesitation in saying that the Christian religion is the true religion ... [the grace of God] which differentiates our religion, the Christian, from all others as the true religion."⁹ He further claims that Jesus Christ, as the one and only incarnation of the true God, provides Christianity "alone the commission and the authority to be a missionary religion i.e. to confront the world of religions as the one true religion". Similarly, Emil Brunner states that true Christianity is the only true religion. Without giving any reason, he says, "A theology that allows itself to be drawn into producing proofs for its claim to revelation has already thrown into sponge."¹⁰ This statement is not just from Christianity, but a minority sect of Christianity (a form of Evangelical Protestantism). Although it is not convincing for people believing that the only true God just belongs to one group of people, Barth and Brunner insist that revelation cannot be judged by reason. They insist that there is no doubt for the revelation of God in Jesus. On the other hand, they reject other revelation of God without giving any reasons. It seems clear that this unreasonable judgement is wholly unacceptable. The attempt to reduce all religions to one is, otherwise, denied to these religions. According to Charles Davis, a universal religion is not philosophically acceptable due to the violation of the principle of freedom. As a result, "plurality in matters of faith and morals should be accepted".¹¹

After identifying the instrumental function of revelation and denying the exclusivist opinion about revelation, we need to find out what is in common within revelation of the great world religions by identifying the essential content and purpose.

As there is tremendous information in question from the world great religions, we need first find out the essentials of faiths from their non-essentials. Arnold Toynbee tries to distinguish the content of religion into two parts: "(1) essential truths and counsels, verities which constitute their basic spiritual appeal and which, according to Toynbee, remain the same in all the higher religions to date; and (2) non-essential practices and propositions, that is, products of the local and temporary cultural patterns with which the essentials are overlaid, and which differ widely from one another."¹²

According to Toynbee, although there are differences among the world great religions and sometimes they seem contradictory to one another, these differences are just results of the local and temporary cultural patterns with the same core value. As a

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1975), p.17

¹⁰ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (London: SCM Press, 1947), p.212

¹¹ Harold, Coward. *Pluralism in the World Religions: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: One World, 2000).

¹² Marie, Swabey "Toynbee and the Limits of Religious Tolerance." *The Journal of Philosophy* 55, no. 24 (1958) p.1029-042.

result, they are going to the non-essential category and should not be an obstacle for transforming people from self-centeredness to Real-centeredness which is the purpose of each religion in the religious pluralist perspective.

On the other hand, the "communion" comes out from spiritual presence behind different phenomena to bring people into harmony, and get people free from self-centeredness. Aldous Huxley says, "Man's final end, the purpose of his existence, is to love, know and be united with the immanent and transcendent Godhead. And this identification of self with spiritual not-self can be achieved only by 'dying to' selfness and living in spirit."¹³ The essential revelation found by Toynbee common to all the great religions is that "The true purpose of a higher religion is to radiate the spiritual counsels and truths ...".¹⁴ This statement reveals the same idea of the meaning of religion in Chinese characters 宗教, zongjiao. According to Buddhist Venerable Master Chin Kung, "The Chinese character 宗, zong, has three meanings: principal, important, and revered. Jiao, 教, means education, teaching, and transformation. When combined, the two characters mean principal education, important teaching, and revered transformation for humankind." Religion is, therefore, an indispensable universal education for humanity. The essential contents of religion are love, ethical, moral and causality education, which is based on the teaching that the whole universe is one entity. And the core purpose of this revelation is to enable people to get rid of his innate self-centeredness and become sages and saints.¹⁵

We can find evidence for the essential contents of religious education or revelation if we look at the sacred scriptures of all great traditions.

The first common content of revelation is love which is the core value of revelation of all world great religions. This sacred love is in human nature, and it is the source of all the good deeds of humans. The Bible says, "Love one another! Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another." (John 13:34 NIV); The Qur'an says, "Allah is Ever Oft-Pardoning, All-Powerful." (The Noble Qur'an 4:149, King Fahd Complex); A Sikh text says, "More than all else do I cherish at heart that love which makes me live a limitless life in this world." (Songs of Kabir: XXIV, Tr. by Rabindranath Tagore); A Hindu text says, "May all beings regard me with the eye of a friend. May I regard all with the eye of a friend. May we regard one another with the eye of a friend." (Yajurveda 36:18); A Taoist sacred text says, "Rescue those in difficulty. Relieve those in a desperate situation. Be compassionate towards the desolate.

¹³ Huxley, Aldous *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York, 1945), p.38

¹⁴ Toynbee, Arnold *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.266

¹⁵ Venerable Master Chin Kung, "Achieving the Harmony of the Universe through Religious Education"

Forgive the wrongs of others.” (Lord Wen Chang’s Tract on Hidden Merits); A Confucian text says, “Love all beings, for we all live under the same sky and are supported by the same earth.” (Guidelines for Being a Good Person); In Buddhism, the Avatamsaka Sutra says, “Because the essence of all Buddhas is based on the great compassionate mind, for the sake of all beings, they give rise to the great compassion. From great compassion, they develop the Bodhi mind. Through the Bodhi mind, they attain supreme, perfect enlightenment.” (Chapter 40, Avatamsaka Sutra)

The second essential content of revelation is ethical education which teaches us how to interact with others properly and is an essential education given from each religion. The Christian Bible says, “For God said, ‘Honour your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother is to be put to death.’” (Matthew 15:4 NIV) “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves.” (Romans 12:10 NIV) “Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.” (Colossians 3:19 NIV); Hindu texts say, “She is a true wife whose heart is devoted to her lord (her husband). ... The wife is a man’s half.” (Mahabharata 1.74.159, Tr. by Kisari Mohan Ganguli) “There should be no error in the duties towards the gods and manes. Let your mother be a goddess unto you. Let your father be a god unto you. Let your teacher be a god unto you. Let your guest be a god unto you.” (Taittiriya Upanishad I-xi-2-4, Tr. by Swami Gambhirananda) Buddhist sutras say, “Be filial to and provide for parents. Be respectful to and serve teachers.” (Visualization Sutra) “Parents and children, siblings, spouses, and relatives should respect and love each other, and should not be hateful or jealous of one another. They should share what they have with those who do not. They should not be greedy or stingy. Their speech and manner should always be gentle. They should not be defiant or unkind to one another.” (Chapter 33, Infinite Life Sutra); The sacred text of Islam, the Qur’an, says, “Do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, Al-Masâkin (the needy), the neighbour who is near of kin, the neighbour who is a stranger, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (you meet), and those (slaves) whom your right hands possess.” (The Noble Qur’an 4:36, King Fahd Complex)

The third essential content of revelation is moral education which teaches people to be righteous with their thoughts, speech and behaviour and it provides benchmarks against which we ought to think, speak and behave. Judaic texts say, “Righteousness exalts a nation; But sin condemns to any people.” (Proverbs 14:34 NIV) “To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.” (Proverbs 21:3 NIV) “The first step in transgression is evil thought, the second scoffing, the third pride, the fourth outrage, the fifth idleness, the sixth hatred, and the seventh an evil eye.” (Chap. 6, Tract Derech Eretz-Zuta, Book 5, Babylonian Talmud); A Taoist text says, “Accumulate virtues and merits. Be compassionate towards all living beings. Be loyal to our duties. Be filial to our parents. Be loving to our younger siblings. Be respectful to our elder siblings. Reform others by correcting ourselves first. ... Sympathise with others’ sufferings, and rejoice at their meritorious deeds. Succour those desperately in need. Rescue those in peril.” (Accounts of Request and Response); Buddhist sutras

say, “The ten virtuous deeds. What are the ten? They are eternally refraining from killing, stealing, immoral conducts, false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, enticing speech, greed, anger, and wrong views. ... These ten virtuous deeds will lead us to perfectly accomplish the ten powers [of a Buddha], the [four kinds of] fearlessness, the eighteen unique Dharmas [of a Buddha] and all Buddha-dharmas.” (Ten Virtuous Deed Sutra) “Always using the practice of the Six Paramitas of giving, precept observation, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom, he taught and transformed beings to help them steadfastly establish a bodhi mind and dwell on the unsurpassed true way to the supreme, perfect enlightenment.” (Chapter 8, Infinite Life Sutra)

The fourth essential content of revelation is teaching about the law of causality which introduces people to the causal law that good deeds bring about good consequences, whereas bad deeds result in bad consequences. This is a guiding principle for people to head towards good fortune, avoid misfortune and change their destinies. Confucian Classics say, “Good deeds turn into abundant blessings while evil conduct results in myriad misfortunes.” (Yi Xun, The Book of History) “Blessed are the ones who follow the Way; Condemned are the ones who go against the Way. Cause and effect go in pairs like shadow and body, echo and sound.” (Da Yu Mo, The Book of History) “By accumulating goodness, a family will enjoy good fortune for generations; by amassing evil, a family will suffer misfortune for generations.” (Wen Yan Zhuan, The Book of Changes) The Catholic Bible says, “His evil intent recoils upon his head; his wicked design comes back in his face.” (Psalms 7:17 CCB) “The generous man does himself a favour while a cruel man wounds his own flesh.” (Proverbs 11:17 CCB) “Remember: the one who sows meagrely will reap meagrely, and there shall be generous harvests for the one who sows generously.” (2 Corinthians 9:6 CCB); The Christian Bible says, “Woe to the wicked! Disaster will upon them! They will be paid back for what their hands have done.” (Isaiah 3:11 NIV) “I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.” (Jeremiah 17:10 NIV) “Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favouritism.” (Colossians 3:25 NIV); The sacred text of Islam, the Qur’an, says, “And whatever of misfortune befalls you, it is because of what your hands have earned.” (The Noble Qur’an 42:30, King Fahd Complex) “The good will live in bliss, and the wicked will burn in the Fire.” (Qur’an 82:13-14, Tr. by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem) “Whosoever does a good deed, it is for his ownself, and whosoever does evil, it is against (his ownself).” (The Noble Qur’an 45:15, King Fahd Complex)

The fifth essential content of revelation is the education of oneness which helps people to achieve the ultimate goal of religious revelation to join with the divine spirit. The Christian Bible says, ‘All of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one.’ (John 17:21-22 NIV); The Noble Qur’an says, ‘Mankind were but one community.’

(The Noble Qur'an 10:19, King Fahd Complex); The Catholic Bible says, '... We are members of one another.' (Ephesians 4:25 CCB) A sacred Judaic text says, "love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:18 NIV); A Hindu sacred text says, "Here in Me living as one, O Arjuna, behold the whole universe, movable and immovable, and anything else that thou wouldst see!" (The Bhagavad Gita 11:7); A Taoist classic says, "Heaven, Earth and I came into existence together, and all things and I are one." (Chapter 2 of Inner Chapters, Zhuangzi) In Buddhism, the Surangama Sutra says, "All dharma arisen are only the manifestations of the mind. All causes and effects, worlds and the tiniest dust within the universe take on substance due to the mind." (Volume One) The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch says, "Who would have thought that the True Nature is intrinsically pure! Who would have thought that the True Nature is intrinsically free from arising and ceasing (cycle of life and death)! Who would have thought that the True Nature is intrinsically and perfectly self-sufficient! Who would have thought that the True Nature is intrinsically free from change! Who would have thought that all things are the manifestation of the True Nature!' (Chapter One Autobiography, The Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng, translated by A.F. Price and Wong Mou-Lam)

As we recognise oneness of all, loving all beings in the universe is to love ourselves. We will thus naturally be able to serve all beings, as caring as a mother of her child. The ultimate goal of the sage education of all faiths is to guide people to return to the oneness, in other words, "Real-centeredness". Truly experiencing the concept of 'oneness' is the most cherished virtue of human beings.

In conclusion, from religious pluralism perspective, due to the ineffability of the ultimate Reality, revelation may come from different religions in the forms of experienced Reals which is transcendent to people who have various mentality, history and culture background. Although the practices and some doctrines are different with one another, these differences could be included into non-essential category and the similarities could be included in the essential category. The great world traditions share the same instrumental function which is the mean of guiding people to transform themselves from self-centeredness to Real-centeredness. Thus, the revelation is valuable only when it could serve as a guide for deeds, practice, ways of living to achieve the one ineffable ultimate Real. After showing the sacred scripts of each great world tradition, we can find that the essential contents and the purpose of the revelation are same. All the world great religions, without exception, gives people love, ethical, moral, causality education and 'oneness' education. And if people follow this revelation without compromising, whatever religion they are in, they can achieve their potential to join the divine spirit or become saints or sages. That is the reason why John Hick claims the moral and spiritual fruits in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and other great world religions "are more or less on a par with the fruits of Christianity".¹⁶

¹⁶ Hick. *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p.14

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