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Religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue: Beyond universalism and particularism

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According to the now generally accepted typology, religious pluralism is contrasted to exclusivism and inclusivism. The exclusivists insist that only one religion is true and all others are false.¹ The inclusivists maintain that only one religion represents the absolute truth and all others have only some measure of it.² Obviously, interfaith dialogue in these two cases can only be a convenient name for the religious mission of converting all to the only true or the only absolutely true religion after the demise of colonialism.³ True and genuine interfaith dialogue is thus congenial only to a pluralistic view of different religions as on a par with each other. This is perhaps why, despite persistent resistance from fundamentalists, religious pluralism is now slowly but steadily gaining its momentum.

However, there are two very different models of religious pluralism with very different implications for inter-faith dialogue. On the one hand, different religions are seen as different parochial expressions of some universal essence. Interfaith dialogue is thus important in enabling all religions to better express this common essence. Call it universalism. On the other hand, different religions are regarded as different in their fundamentals. Interfaith dialogue is then necessary for different religions to clearly realize these fundamental differences so that they can tolerate each other. Call it particularism. In the following, having briefly sketched these two contrasting models (using John Hick and S. Mark Heim as their respective representatives⁴), I shall attempt to develop an alternative model of religious pluralism with alternative implications for interfaith dialogue.

Two contrasting models

Religious plurality is not something new. Nor is it a newly recognized fact. Yet it is usually seen as something negative, to be overcome by or subsumed under something universal. As Stanley Samartha points out,⁵ this universalization has taken very different forms. One is to extend one partic-

ular religion and make it universal. The other is to see God alone as the universal that can unify all religions as its plural manifestations. The former is common to the traditional exclusivism and the not so traditional inclusivism, while the latter is unique to the emerging pluralism, of which John Hick is indisputably the most important representative. Hick proposes a theo-centric pluralism as a Copernican revolution in the interpretation of religious plurality. While the traditional view sees one's own religion as the center of the universe of faiths, Hick believes 'that the universe of faiths centers upon *God*, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion. He is the sun, the originative source of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways'.⁶

To understand Hick's theo-centric pluralism, it is important to see both his indebtedness to and revision of Kant's epistemology.⁷ On the one hand, Kant's distinction between noumenon and phenomenon is crucial in Hick's conception of religion as a human response to the transcendent Reality. Without the transcendent Reality, all religious worldviews would become merely human illusions. Yet the transcendent Reality as represented by any religious worldview is not the Reality itself but the Reality as humanly experienced. On the other hand, the conceptual scheme that religion uses to respond to the transcendent is not universal and invariable as Kant believes but is culture-dependent. For Hick,

because the different ways of being human have produced a variety of such conceptual systems, with their associated spiritual practices, the transcendent Reality... postulated by a religious understanding of religion is experienced in a variety of ways which have become enshrined in the different religious traditions.⁸

Thus, in Kant's epistemology, while we can never reach the noumenon, we can still have necessary and universal knowledge, thanks to the universal conceptual scheme. In Hick's philosophy of religion, however, we can never have a universal religion because of the multiplicity of our conceptual schemes to perceive the transcendent from.

There have been some reported attempts to rewrite Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* such that it retains an essentially Kantian epistemology while deleting the problematic conception of the noumenon. Whether such ambitious attempts can be successful or not is of course not something that we need surmise here. However, it is certainly impossible for us to have an essentially Hickian philosophy of religion without any encumbrance of the transcendent Reality. For Hick, if there is no such a Reality common to all religions, 'it would be impossible to compare them, still less to grade them on a common scale'.⁹ Hick concedes that it is very difficult if not impossible to grade different religions as a whole. However, this is not because, as one of his critics assumes, Hick believes that all religions are 'equally

correct by virtue of being particular affirmations of the generic truth that there is a transcendent Reality and that salvation/liberation comes by centering on it'.¹⁰ Rather, it is because all religions are mixtures of good and evil. For example, insight into inner liberation and the validation of a hierarchical caste system have been co-existent in Hinduism; emphasis on tolerance and an indifference to social justice have gone hand in hand in Buddhism; freedom from color prejudices have been concomitant with the sanction of 'holy war' in Islam; and the promotion of democratic system and the endorsement of systematic racism have been twins in Christianity. It is 'in face of these complexities', Hick argues, that 'it seems impossible to make the global judgment that any one religious tradition has contributed more good or less evil, or a more favourable balance of good and evil, than others'.¹¹ However the very fact that we can say that each religious tradition has both its good and evil aspects implies that we have a common and ultimate criterion to make piece-meal judgments of religious beliefs on both intrareligious and interreligious levels. For Hick, such a criterion can only be 'the adequacy of their conceptions of the divine and the value of the forms of life which flow from those conceptions'.¹²

With this Copernican revolution, Hick encourages us to 'move emphatically from the confessional to the truth-seeking stance' in interfaith dialogue.¹³ In confessional dialogue, everyone is convinced that only her own faith has truth or absolute truth while all others have no or only relative truth. One enters interfaith dialogue only in order to induce a change of beliefs in others. In truth-seeking dialogue, however,

each is conscious that the Transcendent Being is infinitely greater than his own limited vision of it . . . and they accordingly seek to share their visions in the hope that each may be helped towards a fuller awareness of the Divine Reality before which they both stand.¹⁴

In other words, people in confessional dialogue, even at their most sincere, always hold something hidden from dialogue and immune to change. In truth-seeking dialogue, however, everything is subject to the unique logic of dialogue except their common desire to have the fuller vision of the same Reality, which, according to Hick, is the underlying condition of interfaith dialogue. Through such interfaith dialogue, different religions can be mutually criticized, enriched, and transformed. The result of such mutual criticism, enrichment, and transformation, Hick claims,

may well be a growing world ecumenism, in which the common commitment of faith in a higher spiritual Reality which demands brotherhood on earth will seem more and more significant, while the differences between the religious traditions will seem proportionately less significant.¹⁵

Hick realizes that such a world ecumenism cannot be a single world religion, as he once hoped.¹⁶ Rather it is a global theology of religions, which

'would consist of theories or hypotheses designed to interpret the religious experience of mankind'.¹⁷

It goes without saying that the model of religious pluralism Hick proposes represents a great milestone in our interpretations of religious plurality and Hick is indeed not alone in holding this view.¹⁸ However, it is this view that is now drawing increasing criticism, primarily not from the traditional exclusivists or inclusivists who are now indeed fighting back, but from those who claim themselves as more authentic pluralists. In the following, I shall choose S. Mark Heim as their representative,¹⁹ not only because he has been persistent in deconstructing Hick's model but also because he is systematic in constructing his own alternative.

On the one hand, Heim argues that Hick's universalistic model of religious pluralism is no less imperialistic than the exclusivism and inclusivism it criticizes. It pretends to be a religious or theological Esperanto, into which 'the sentences from Swahili are first translated . . . and then from that structure into French or any other tongue'.²⁰ Yet for Heim, the pluralistic language that Hick recommends is not such a neutral language. Rather it is 'the cultural structures of plausibility against which modern Western Christianity has been tested'.²¹ To recommend such a particular language to all amounts to what Kenneth Surin, Hick's former student, ridicules as the universalization of McDonald's Hamburger.²² Indeed, such a pluralism has its difficulties in dealing with religions claiming the exclusive or inclusive possession of truth. To be pluralistic, it has to recognize them as equally valid manifestations of the ultimate Reality; at the same time, however, it has to regard them as false simply because their understanding of the universe of faiths is not pluralistic.²³

On the other hand, Heim rejects Hick's pluralism as superficial if not completely false. On Hick's model, plurality is only a phenomenon of religions, while their noumenon is singular. In other words, the emphasis of Hick's pluralism, ironically enough, is on the universality rather than the plurality of religions. Of course, according to this view, 'differences over historical and trans-historical facts may remain between the traditions, but none of them can be religiously significant since salvation/liberation takes place as well on one side or the other'.²⁴ For Hick, such an attitude toward religious plurality is doing equal justice to people of different faiths. For Heim, however, it ignores the fact that 'to tell the Muslim that she or he is seeking the same thing as the Hindu is not likely to be regarded as a compliment'.²⁵

To overcome this superficial pluralism and to become a more authentic pluralist, Heim has no quarrel with Hick either on the transcendent Reality as the object of religion or on the variety of religious conceptual schemes. What seems problematic to him is Hick's conception of the Reality itself as

universal and yet unknowable, which, according to Heim, makes 'that Reality itself a cosmic zero'.²⁶ For Heim, we cannot rule out, at the very beginning, the possibility that the New Testament (or any other sacred text) perceives the Reality in itself²⁷ and the possibility that the Reality every religion perceives is different. As Heim states, 'the God in whom we [Christians] believe is not quite the same as that of the Jew or Muslim, since our God's character is fundamentally defined by a different standard'.²⁸ To present his view more vividly, Heim asserts that different religions are different keys not to the same lock but to different locks. While there may be only one key or one best key to one particular lock, there is no universal master key to all locks. For example, if salvation is to overcome the barriers of sin and death and to reconcile with a personal God, only Christianity can save. However, if it

is an experience of mystical union with 'the One', then Hinduism can save. If it is an experience of illumination and release from all desire, including the desire for good, then Buddhism can save. If it is faithfulness to one's ancestors, then Shintoism can save. If it is revolution against a privileged class and for state ownership of the means of production, then Marxism can save.²⁹

Heim believes that this model of religious pluralism is a more authentic one. On the one hand, it emphasizes that differences between religions are not merely in phenomenon but in noumenon as well.³⁰ In face of radically different religious worldviews, there is no need to decide which one is true or better than others. For all of them may well be equally true, although true of different Realities.³¹ Thus, people of radically different beliefs can live with each other and accept each other with respect rather than animosity. We realize that we 'are not competitors for the same thing. We are seekers after various things'.³² On the other hand, Heim claims that his pluralism can do equal justice to different attitudes toward religious plurality. Exclusivism could be true because each religion is the only lens through which its unique Reality can be perceived; inclusivism could be true because the unique Reality properly seen through one lens may only be dimly seen through other lenses; and pluralism of Hick's type could be true because all religions may function as unique organizing and sustaining powers in their unique cultures.³³

On Heim's model, the primary goal of interfaith dialogue is then to lay bare the fundamental differences between different religions so that people of different faiths can realize that they are seekers after different things rather than competitors for the same thing. Such a realization makes it possible for different religions to tolerate each other. It also provides different options for people with different religious tastes to choose from.³⁴ Of course, Heim admits, in addition to these primary functions, interfaith dia-

logue can also (1) clarify one's own faith. For instance, Islam's perennial question to Christians about the Trinity help Christians to explain their commitment to monotheism and guard against the error of polytheism; (2) rediscover a lost element in one's own tradition. For example, the stress on the feminine image of the Divine in some other religions help Christians to look at their Scripture afresh; and (3) add some new elements compatible with one's essentials. However, Heim claims, there is a limit:

it cannot create what is not there, nor eliminate what is central. . . . We cannot add a once-for-all incarnation of God in Christ to Hinduism and still have Hinduism. We can't add Buddhist *Karma* to the Christian will of God and still have Christianity.³⁵

Religious pluralism

We are thus presented with two very different models of religious pluralism. Hick's emphasizes the universality of all religions while Heim's underscores the uniqueness of each one. These two seemingly incompatible models of religious pluralism, however, share the view that religion represents some Reality that exists behind, beyond, or beneath this world and, therefore, the meaning and truth of a religious picture should be determined according to the adequacy of this representation. They debate only on whether all religions represent the same Reality or different ones and whether they represent the reality in itself or only in its shadow. Now it is this shared assumption that seems to me problematic.

To say this is of course not to say that, after going beyond, behind, or beneath this world, we can discover that there is no such divine Reality, either one or many, for religions to respond to.³⁶ Rather it is to say that, if we have to use the word 'Reality' in the literal sense,³⁷ we can never get beyond or behind or beneath this world to see whether there is any Reality over there for religion to respond to, or how many such Realities there are, or whether religions represent them correctly. For this, as Hick himself realizes when he is at his best, requires a vantage-point from which one can observe and compare the divine Reality over there and the religious conceptual schemes down here.³⁸ Both Hick and Heim make it clear that they do not pretend to have such a cosmic vision. In this sense, Hick not only acknowledges that Heim's particularism is theoretically possible 'since in most cases gods are explicitly or implicitly finite beings whose powers and spheres of operation are at least approximately known; and many of them could co-exist without contradiction'.³⁹ He even concedes that his own universalism is only a hypothesis that cannot be shown as true or as overwhelmingly probable on the basis of our present limited experiences.⁴⁰ Similarly, Heim argues that Hick's model is wrong only because he rules

out at the very beginning the possibility that different religions may not only represent different Realities but may also represent them correctly. Thus, when proposing his own particularistic model, Heim admits that he does not rule out 'the possibility that some faiths, at least, might be forms of the same thing'.⁴¹

If so, we may wonder how Hick and Heim could still stick to their contrasting hypotheses so passionately. The reason is that each believes that his own position, if not demonstrably closer to the metaphysical matter of fact, at least makes better sense of religious plurality than the other.⁴² For Hick, whose chief task is to deconstruct 'the myth of uniqueness'⁴³ of any particular religion, it is arrogant to think that one's own faith, which in most cases is determined by one's birth, must be the only or the best representation of the Real while all others are false or only remotely true. Thus it is more democratic to hypothesize that all religions are roughly equal human responses to the same Reality. For Heim, who is mainly arguing against universalism, it is both presumptuous to tell others that 'you are believing in nothing but another form of my God' and self-humiliating to think that 'I am believing in nothing but another form of your Buddhahood'. It is therefore more appropriate to hypothesize that different religions are different human responses to different Realities.

Both Hick's contention against 'the myth of uniqueness' and Heim's objection to universalism are certainly well-taken. However, they should not be considered as incompatible with each other, grounded in contradictory metaphysical speculations about transcendent Reality. To make better sense of religious plurality as both Hick and Heim desire, we had better turn to the cultural traditions from which various religious pictures derive their meanings and in which they play their roles. Hick is of course right to say that more than 95 percent of people accept their religions as a gift of their birth. One becomes a Christian mainly because he is born to a Christian family, a Buddhist to a Buddhist family, a Hindu a Hindu family, etc. However, the question is not only how a religious picture is accepted but also how it is constructed in the first place and, once accepted, how it is revised and sometimes even rejected or replaced. Obviously, one constructs or revises or rejects a religious picture or replaces it with something else not because one has a better perception of the transcendent Reality that exists behind, beyond, or beneath this world. Rather it is because one needs an adequate picture to order one's experiences and life. In other words, the criterion by which to judge a religious picture is not its correspondence to a transcendent Reality but its adequacy to human experiences. Thus, as Gordon Kaufman argues, we have to

begin with an awareness that all Talk of God belongs to and has its meaning within a particular symbolical frame of orientation for human life which emerged in a particular strand of human history. The symbol

'God', like the rest of language and like other important religious symbols around the world, was created as the women and men in that historical movement gradually put together a world-picture which enabled them, with some measure of success, to come to terms with the exigencies of life. This symbol, then (like all others), must be understood as a product of the human imagination. . . . This symbol (like all others) will need to be regularly subjected to criticism and testing, as we seek to see whether it continues to do the work for which it was created, whether it can continue to function significantly in human life.⁴⁴

However, we are not thereby endorsing a naturalistic and non-religious interpretation of religious plurality.⁴⁵ It is not naturalistic because it does not argue that there is no transcendent Reality or that religion cannot respond to this Reality. Agreeing with both Hick and Heim that it is not something that can be proved or disproved, we only step further to say that it is not something that we should even try to prove or disprove. Our examination of how people construct, revise and reject a religious picture shows us that it is not something that plays any significant role in human religious life. To say this is of course not to say that there is no distinction between those who believe that there is such a transcendent Reality (theists) and those who do not (atheists), between those who believe that there is only one such Reality (monotheists) and those who believe that there are many (poly-theists), and between those who believe that this transcendent Reality is knowable (gnostics) and those who do not (agnostics). Rather it is to say that whatever beliefs people hold regarding the transcendent Reality, they hold such beliefs not because they find these beliefs true of the metaphysical matter of fact but because they feel them indispensable for ordering their experiences and regulating their life. In other words, we are not arguing that religious people cannot believe in any transcendent Reality or that all beliefs in transcendent Reality are meaningless, as the positivists would like to argue. Rather, we are arguing that the meaning and the truth of religious beliefs, including beliefs in the transcendent Reality, should be understood not in term of what they are supposed to represent but in terms of how they play their roles in human religious life.

Nor are we here encouraging a non-realist or anti-realist interpretation of religious plurality.⁴⁶ To say that a religious worldview should be interpreted not according to what it is supposed to represent but according to how it actually works in human life is not to say that a belief in God is nothing but a belief in the ideal of God. Of course, if by the reality of God, as in the case of Hick and Heim, we can only mean the Reality beyond, behind, or beneath this world, our interpretation is indeed non-Realistic. However, my contention is that the reality of God is not to be confused with the physical reality, for example, the reality of a tree. The distinction between the two is

clearly brought out by Kant when he distinguishes between reality in theoretical or cognitive reason and reality in practical or moral reason. In the former, the reality of something is the cause of our knowledge of it. In the latter, however, the reality of something is inseparable from our belief in it and our willingness and ability to act accordingly. Thus, since there is nothing that can cause our intuition of God, God has no cognitive Reality and our conception of God cannot be theoretically true. However, God exhibits its practical Reality and our ideal of God becomes morally true in the fact that we are willing and able to use the ideal of God to regulate our life. To discern the reality or truth of such a nature is, as Kant claims, ‘only to discern the possibility or impossibility of willing the action by which a certain object would be made Real, provided we had the ability to bring it about’.⁴⁷

In other words, unlike the physical reality, the Reality of God is not something independent of those who have the ideal of God and act accordingly. The concept of God becomes true and the God in whom people believe becomes Real, as the Kantian theologian Kaufman points out, only when people are led to ‘order their existence “under God” – actually find new life, genuine fulfillment, their own humanity (i.e., what has traditionally been called “salvation”)’.⁴⁸ This abstract Kantian argument gets vivid expression in William James, who makes a similar distinction between the reality causing human knowledge and the reality to be proven by human practice. To illustrate the latter, he analyzes the reality of love. Love certainly has its reality. It is not merely the lover’s illusion. However, this is not a reality that is pre-existent in those who later become lovers but is created by those who are actually loving each other. For if I, as a lover of you, James argues, ‘stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you shall have done something apt, as the absolutists say, *ad extorquendum assensum meum*, ten to one your liking never comes’.⁴⁹ Similarly, to see whether our ideal of God has practical truth is to see whether we are willing and able to use it to order our experiences and life. For example, a patriarchal God once believed in by many is now losing its moral Reality simply because we are more and more convinced of the equality between people of different races, colors, sexes, and classes.

Thus, the model of religious pluralism that I am suggesting here interprets religious plurality not through metaphysical meditation about transcendent Reality but with the help of historical studies of religious traditions. Such a model aims to incorporate Hick’s and Heim’s respective insights about religious plurality, while avoiding their metaphysical presuppositions about the transcendent Reality. However, since this model of religious pluralism is essentially dialogical or, as Francis Schüssler Fiorenza would like to have it, communicative,⁵⁰ its contours can become clear only when we turn to the topic of interfaith dialogue or communication.

Interfaith dialogue

The ideals of interfaith dialogue proposed by Hick and Heim, as we have seen, correspond to their respective models of religious pluralism. For Hick, since all religions reflect the same ultimate Reality, the aim of interfaith dialogue is to learn from each other in order to obtain the best possible response to the Reality. For Heim, however, since different religions have different Realities to respond to, the purpose of interfaith dialogue is to make open these fundamental differences with the hope of engendering greater tolerance.

With their respective models of religious pluralism now being deconstructed, however, the debate between Hick and Heim on interfaith dialogue cannot be transcended automatically. For even when we turn to the human traditions in which religions have their actual lives, it is still possible for someone to argue whether these traditions are essentially the same or fundamentally different. For example, mainly from his historical study of various religious traditions which have been interwoven into a single human religious history, Wilfred Cantwell Smith finds that these radically different traditions have 'faith' in common, which 'is the essential human quality. . . . It is constitutive of man as human'.⁵¹ What distinguishes religions from each other are the respective forms the common faith takes. Thus, he agrees with Hick that it is possible, through interfaith dialogue or, as he prefers, colloquium, to have a world theology which is neither Christian, nor Buddhist, nor Islamic, etc., but a world theology as such that is "acceptable to, even cogent for, all humankind."⁵² In contrast, heavily drawing on Wittgenstein's philosophy of culture, George Lindbeck sees different religions as different cultural-linguistic systems. In his outlook,

it is just as hard to think of religions as it is to think of cultures or languages as having a single generic or universal experiential essence of which particular religions – or cultures or languages – are varied manifestations or modifications. One can in this outlook no more be religious in general than one can speak language in general.⁵³

He concurs therefore with Heim that the main goal of interfaith dialogue is religious tolerance without competition, or, as he favors, reconciliation without capitulation, which means that 'historically opposed positions can in some, even if not all, cases be reconciled while remaining in themselves unchanged'.⁵⁴

Thus, the debate between Hick and Heim on interfaith dialogue cannot be ignored simply by rejecting their metaphysical presuppositions. In fact, we can not afford to do so. For both Hick and Heim have something very important to say about interfaith dialogue, especially in the way each criticizes the other's position. Heim is right in emphasizing that there is no

common measure for all religions according to which to build a global theology. In this case, it is true that any proposed religious or theological Esperanto amounts to the universalization of one's own particular language. However, Hick is equally right in criticizing Heim's confessional model of interfaith dialogue which sees different religions as self-contained monads and therefore immune to influences from each other.

Our task is then to integrate their unique insights by overcoming their respective problems, which result from the same confusion of universality (universalism) with interconnectedness (holism). Observing historical interconnections of all religions, Hick concludes that there must be something universal that connects them together. Perceiving the respective uniqueness of each religion, Heim assumes that they must be independent from each other. Here, the premises of both are correct⁵⁵ but the conclusion of neither is adequate. On the one hand, as Smith's masterful comparative studies of human religious history have shown, all religions are radically different but nevertheless form an interconnected human religious history. On the other hand, as Wittgenstein's profound philosophical insight teaches, different religions are interconnected but there is no universal connector. A long and strong rope is made not by any single strong fiber running throughout its length but by the overlap of various short and otherwise weak fibers. Similarly, an integrated human religious history is formed not by any universal glue, either common God or common faith, that connects all religious traditions together but by the overlap of these very traditions. To say that Christianity is interconnected with all other religions, for example, is not to say that there is something common to all these religions. For what connects Christianity to Judaism is different from what connects it to Islam, which is again different from what connects it to Hinduism or Buddhism or Confucianism.

Thus, the model of religious pluralism that I am proposing here emphasizes that different religious traditions are all different but not to be isolated and all interconnected but not to be universalized.⁵⁶ Interfaith dialogue, on this model, focuses neither on the commonality of all nor the particularity of each. Rather, it emphasizes the possibility of mutual learning and teaching, a possibility that has to be distinguished from commensurability. For Hick, different religions can teach and learn from each other only because there is a common measure, while for Heim since different religions are incommensurable, they have nothing, at least nothing essential, to learn from and teach to each other. Here, it seems to me important to follow the philosopher Richard Rorty's suggestion 'to distinguish between the following two theses: (1) there is no single commensurating language, known in advance, which will provide an idiom into which to translate any new theory, poetic idiom, or native culture; and (2) there are unlearnable languages'.⁵⁷

The first is now almost a platitude which says that we cannot have an a-historical and trans-cultural God's eye view to compare all religions to see whether they are all the same or, for that matter, all different. The second, however, is untenable. While there is no common measure for all religions, there are enough overlaps that make it possible for them not only to talk to but teach and learn from each other. Here, it is important not to think of different religious traditions, like other cultural traditions, on the model of alternative geometries. Alternative geometries, as Rorty points out, 'are irreconcilable because they have axiomatic structures, and contradictory axioms. They are *designed* to be irreconcilable. Cultures are not so designed, and do not have axiomatic structures'.⁵⁸ Heim excludes the possibility of mutual influences among different religions exactly because he sees these religions as such geometries with pre-designed goals which are neither reconcilable to each other nor changeable throughout their own history. However, if we look at the actual development of any religious tradition, we will find that not only does each generation try to redefine the goal of their inherited religion but these very re-definitions have never been independent from the influences from other religious traditions and other cultural aspects of its own tradition. In this sense, I think Rorty is again right to say that 'cultural [or, for that matter, religious] differences are not different in kind from differences between old and ("revolutionary") new theories propounded within a single culture [or religion]'.⁵⁹

Mutual learning and teaching is possible here because, in interfaith dialogue, as Jeffrey Stout points out, we are not relating our own language and that of our partners to a third language,⁶⁰ what Swidler would like to call religious or theological Esperanto. Nor, as Hilary Putnam points out, are we equating the concepts and images used in another culture or religion in meaning and reference with any concepts and images *we* possess.⁶¹ Rather, we are relating the other language to ours and rendering 'the behavior of others at least minimally reasonable by *our* lights'.⁶² Thus, every one in the dialogue is obliged to tell her partners what she believes is true, hoping that it may also be true for them.⁶³ At the same time, one is also ready to accept from her partners whatever is true to her and weave it coherently into her own web of beliefs. These two sides are inseparable in interfaith dialogue. If everyone only wants to teach others without being willing to learn, then no one can actually teach anyone anything. However, if everyone only wants to learn without the passion to teach others, no one can really learn anything from anybody either.⁶⁴ Here, the passion to teach not accompanied by the desire to learn will lead toward fanaticism, while the desire to learn without the passion to teach will result in shallow friendliness.⁶⁵ Thus religious missions to teach others and theological reconstructions through learning from others are simultaneously accomplished in interfaith dialogue. Of course,

exactly what one can teach to as well as learn from others can never be pre-determined before any actual interfaith dialogue begins. In other words, what one holds as true and wants to teach others has also to be subjected to the unique logic of interfaith dialogue.

Thus, the most important feature of the interfaith dialogue that I am proposing here is that, unlike Hick's and Heim's, it does not endorse any particular outcome as final. No particular result of dialogue is immune to the forces of further dialogue which is open-ended. Interfaith dialogue could result in, among others, conversion from one religion into another (one possibility open to Heim), or reconciliation without capitulation (another possibility open to Heim), or synthetic unification (a possibility open to Hick).⁶⁶ Yet none of them is to be taken as final and immune to revisions required by further dialogues. The religious conversion reached at one point of the dialogue could be re-converted, the reconciliation re-confronted, and the unification re-particularized, if our further dialogues necessitate such steps.

Yet, the typical consequence of the interfaith dialogue that sees dialogue itself rather than any of its particular outcomes as final, I would like to suggest, is a Gadamerian fusion of horizons. Differing from a synthetic unity that fuses two different horizons into one, this fusion of horizons emphasizes that, through interfaith dialogue, the horizons of two different religions are fused with and transformed by each other but remain different. This is so not necessarily because the part of religion A that religion B considers as good and wants to assimilate may be exactly the part that religion A wants to sacrifice in order to weave coherently into itself something good from religion B. Rather it is because, as we pointed out earlier, when accepting something from an alien religion as meaningful and true, one judges about meaningfulness and truth not in the light of the alien religion but in her own light. Thus, what is taken from one religion and is woven into the belief system of another often takes on a very different meaning and plays a very different role in its new incarnations.

The Gadamerian fusion of horizons, however, is to be understood here not as a prescription of an ideal interfaith dialogue but as a description of actual interfaith dialogues. In other words, we are not saying that interfaith dialogue can only lead to fusion of horizons or more to it than to unification, or conversion, or reconciliation without capitulation. Rather, we are saying that all of these possible outcomes, together with other possibilities (such as the establishment of new religious movements and the disintegration of one religion into several ones), can be better understood as fusions of horizons in various degrees.

For example, the unification that Hick aspires to is an example in which the fusion of the two or more horizons is only maximized. The world theology desired by Hick and other universalists is an attempt made by some

particular traditions to make best sense of their neighbor's religious world-views from their own point of view. Thus, we may have a world theology from the Christian or Buddhist or Islamic or Judaic or Hindu point of view. Yet, in contrast to Smith's contention, we can never have a world theology as such that is from everyone's point of view.⁶⁷ Heim's conversion is another case in which a fusion of horizons, not a complete deletion of one religious or cultural system by another, takes place. This tells why the difference, for example, between an American Christian and a Chinese-converted Christian is as big as, if not bigger than, the difference between the American Christian and her compatriotic Buddhist or the difference between the Chinese-turned Christian and her compatriotic Buddhist. Again, the reconciliation without capitulation that Heim also endorses is to be understood as an example in which the fusion of horizons is only minimized. For Heim himself allows for mutual transformations of religions so long as the fundamental norms of each is kept intact.

Moreover, in all these cases, we have to remind ourselves that the interfaith dialogue has hardly if ever been a dialogue between two or more religious traditions as a whole but only between some of their members. Thus when we are talking about the unification of two religions, or conversion of one religion into another, or reconciliation without capitulation of two religions, we are only talking about the part of the religious traditions actually involved in the interfaith dialogue. Thus, in conclusion, I would like to emphasize a point that our model of interfaith dialogue can both explain as a fact and embrace as an ideal, something neither Hick nor Heim would like to accept: the increasing pluralization of religions is in proportion to the increase in their interconnection, dialogue, and fusion of horizons. In short, pluralization and globalization of religion stand and fall together.⁶⁸

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Notes

1. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2 (Edinburgh: Clark, 1956), 280–361, and Hendrick Kraemer, *Religion and Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956).

2. See Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigation*, vol. 5 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966).
3. For example, the Evangelical John Stott argues that, in 'true' dialogue and encounter, 'we seek both to disclose the inadequacies and falsities of non-Christian religions and to demonstrate the adequacy and truth, the absoluteness and finality of the Lord Jesus Christ' (John Stott, 'Dialogue, Encounter, Even Confrontation' in *Faith Meets Faith: Mission Trends No. 5*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky [New York: Paulist Press, 1981], p. 168).
4. It is to be noted that, according to G. van der Leeuw's phenomenological method (*Religion in Essence and Method* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986]), Hick and Heim develop their contrasting models of religious pluralism according to the object of religion: whether different religions represent the same divine reality or different ones. As I shall point out later, these two contrasting models of religious pluralism can also be maintained by focusing on the subject of religion: human faith.
5. Stanley J. Samartha, 'The Lordship of Jesus Christ And Religious Pluralism', in *Christ's Lordship And Religious Pluralism*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson & Thomas F. Stransky (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 29.
6. John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1980), p. 52.
7. For Hick's own discussion of the relationship of his pluralism to Kant's epistemology, both similarity and difference, see his *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 240–246.
8. John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 21.
9. John Hick, *Problems of religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), p. 69.
10. S. Mark Heim, 'The Pluralistic Hypothesis, Realism, and Post-eschatology', *Religious Studies* 25 (1992): pp. 215–6.
11. John Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 94.
12. John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 68.
13. John Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p. 89.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
16. For example, he once thought that the day will come when 'what we now call different religions will constitute the past history of different emphases and variations within something that it need not be too misleading to call a single world religion' ('The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth', in *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth Claims*, ed. John Hick [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974], p. 151). In *God Has Many Names* (pp. 7, 58), however, he gives up on this hope.
17. John Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p. 8.
18. For the similar theo-centric views, see also Stanley J. Samartha, *One Christ – Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 5; Paul Knitter, *No Other Names: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 208–9.
19. For other critics, see J. A. DiNoia, 'Varieties of Religious Aims: Beyond Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism', in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, ed. Bruce D. Marshal (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 249–274; and Kenneth Surin, 'A "Politics of Speech": Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald's Hamburger', in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religion*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 192–212, and 'Towards a "Materialist" Critique of "Religious Pluralism": An Examination of the Discourse of John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell

- Smith', in *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief: Studies Critical and Comparative*, ed. Ian Hammett (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 114–129.
20. S. Mark Heim, 'Pluralism and the Otherness of World Religions', *First Things* 25 (1992): p. 34. Heim's criticism here is quite to the point. For the global theology that Hick espouses has been dubbed a theological Esperanto by Leonard Swidler, another universalistic pluralist. For him, 'when we say X in "ecumenical Esperanto", it corresponds to A in Christianity, B in Judaism, C in Marxism. Thus we would really be able to talk to and understand each other to a large extent by means of the 'translation' of our traditional languages into "ecumenical Esperanto". ('Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue: The Matrix for All Systematic Reflection Today', in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. Leonard Swidler [Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987], p. 24).
 21. S. Mark Heim, 'Pluralism and the Otherness of World Religion', p. 29. For similar criticism, see also Lesslie Newbigin, 'Religion for the Marketplace', in Gavin D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, p. 137.
 22. See Surin, 'A "Politics of Speech": Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald's Hamburger'.
 23. See S. Mark Heim, 'Mission and Dialogue', *Christian Century* 105 (6 April 1988): p. 342.
 24. S. Mark Heim, 'The Pluralistic Hypothesis, Realism, and Post-eschatology', p. 211.
 25. Heim, *Is Christ the Only Way?* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985), p. 29.
 26. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
 27. See *Ibid.*, p. 25.
 28. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
 29. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
 30. See S. Mark Heim, 'Pluralisms: Toward a Theological Framework for Religious Diversity', *Insights* 107 (1991): 23.
 31. In criticizing Hick, Joseph Prabhu holds the same view. While Hick for him is only a religious pluralist but a metaphysical universalist, he calls himself a radical pluralist, a pluralist both religious and metaphysical. According to him, 'the conceptual drive to thinking of the Real as one for us by no means warrants the conclusion that the Real in itself is one. . . . Each of the experienced ultimates of the religious traditions is different from the others, but still real' (Joseph Prabhu, 'Critical Response' to Julius Lipner, *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick*, ed. Harold Hewitt [London: Macmillan Press, 1991], p. 240).
 32. Heim, *Is Christ the Only Way*, p. 150.
 33. For Heim's more detailed arguments, see his 'Pluralisms: Toward a Theological Framework for Religious Diversity', pp. 19–20.
 34. See Heim, *Is Christ the Only Way*, p. 150. For criticism of such a view as commercializing religions, see Lesslie Newbigin, 'Religion for the Marketplace', in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, ed., Gavin D'Costa, p. 138; Jürgen Moltmann, 'Is "Pluralist Theology" Useful for the Dialogue of World Religions?' in *ibid.*, p. 153; and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Christian Redemption between Colonialism and Pluralism', in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp & Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 284.
 35. Heim, *Is Christ the Only Way*, p. 141.
 36. For a similar critique of metaphysical reality in philosophy, see Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 8.

37. While emphasizing that our language of Jesus as Incarnated Son of God is poetical and metaphorical, Hick insists that our language of God is realistic and literal. See his *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 16–17.
38. John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 37.
39. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 234.
40. John Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 14.
41. Heim, *Is Christ the Only Way*, p. 30. See also his ‘Toward a Theological Framework for Religious Plurality’, p. 23.
42. John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 97.
43. See *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed., John Hick & Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987).
44. Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA & London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 39–40.
45. For a distinction between these two interpretations, see John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 1–3.
46. For Hick’s distinction between religious realism and non-realism, see his *Disputed Questions*, pp. 3–16.
47. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1956), p. 59. John Rawls renders Kant’s distinction clear when he says that ‘practical reason is concerned with the production of objects according to a conception of those objects – for example, the conception of a just constitutional regime taken as the aim of political endeavor while theoretical reason is concerned with the knowledge of given objects’ (Rawls, *Political Liberalism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1993], p. 93).
48. Gordon Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1979), p. 76.
49. William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 23.
50. See Fiorenza, ‘Christian Redemption between Colonialism and Pluralism’, p. 290.
51. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 130.
52. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), p. 126.
53. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), p. 23.
54. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 18.
55. Fiorenza combines these two premises in this way: ‘on the one hand, we are increasingly conscious of the particularity of diverse cultures, religious beliefs, life-habits, and political organizations. On the other hand, tele-communication and travel increasingly make the world into a global village’ (‘Christian Redemption between Colonialism and Pluralism’, p. 296).
56. This interpretation of religious plurality, which emphasizes unity without universality and uniqueness without separateness, is indeed very similar to that of Fiorenza’s (see his ‘Christian Redemption between Colonialism and Pluralism’, pp. 285–299). The only difference between us is merely terminological. While Fiorenza calls his communicative interpretation of religious plurality as an alternative to exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, I identify myself as a dialogical or communicative pluralist, in distinction not only to exclusivists and inclusivists but also to universalistic and particularistic pluralists.

57. Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 215.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
60. Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), p. 63.
61. See Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 114.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
63. For similar argument, see David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 99.
64. In this sense, I think Leonard Swidler's distinction between dialogue and debate is misleading. According to Swidler, one enters dialogue with a desire to change one's belief, while one enters a debate in order to induce change in the other (see his 'Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue: The Matrix for All Systematic Reflection Today', p. 6). In contrast, John Cobb is right to say that 'one enters dialogue both as a believer convinced of the claims of one religious tradition and as a human being open to the possibility that one has something to learn from representatives of another religious tradition' ('Beyond "Pluralism"', in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, ed. Gavin D' Costa, pp. 85–86).
65. Stanley Samartha, *One Christ – many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology*, p. 147.
66. See John Cobb's similar argument: if interfaith dialogue 'leads some day to a merging of all the great ways into one that is at the same time Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, primal, and so forth, so be it. If that merged way is fully and authentically Christian, I as a Christian see nothing to fear from that. But if all the great ways continue to the last day distinct from one another, each open to all, enriched by all, and transformed by all, I as a Christian see nothing lacking in that' ('Toward a Christocentric Catholic Theology', in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. Leonard Swidler, p. 99).
67. For Smith's argument for a transition from Christian (Islamic, Judaic, Buddhist, etc.) theology of comparative religion to a world theology of human faith, see his *Towards a World Theology*, pp. 107–129.
68. For an interesting discussion of the relationship between the two, see Peter Beyer, *Religions and Globalization* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994).

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