

World Encyclopedia of Interfaith Studies: Religious Pluralism

Definition of Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism (also known as ‘pluralism’) is a theological position within the typological framework of ‘exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism’, with a relatively modern emergence than the other two. The typology aims at categorising Christian responses to the presence of religious diversity in relation to their interpretation of salvation and truth. Pluralism claims that all religions lead to the same Ultimate Real but are experienced differently as the human conceptions of the Real vary; salvation is not considered exclusive to the Christian faith, other religious traditions are recognised as valid means to salvation. Based on the diversity of pluralist views, some versions of pluralism believe that all religions share the same revelation of the divine, some that share only partial revelation of the divine, and some that none of the religions have any claim to the divine.

The Emergence of Religious Pluralism

The three-fold division of the Christian theology of religions first appeared in print in Alan Race’s *Christians and Religious Pluralism* published in 1983 (Hick, 1995). Pluralism, as a theological position, was brought into prominence mostly through the work of Alan Race and John Hick in the second half of the twentieth century. Hick thinks that the ever growing and developing Christian theology was in need of a major paradigm shift in response to the new awareness of the other world religions (Hick, 1995). Globalisation and convenient access to readily available information about all religions generate the necessary adoption for an ideology of religious pluralism, as the increasing awareness and knowledge of the wider religious world started to bring serious theological issues for the Christian church (Race, 1993). The Christian uniqueness can be damaging to their relationship with people of other faiths, pluralism encourages Christianity to accept, understand and communicate with other religions without compromising its own central beliefs (D’Costa, 1986.).

Despite the more recent engagement with religious pluralism, there is evident historical influence on this concept since the 18th century. Immanuel Kant’s philosophy of religion has had a strong influence on John Hick’s work. Kant views the particular beliefs and practices of

the existing religions as avenues for the moral progress of respective individuals and communities. He famously made the following claim: “There is only one (true) religion; but there can be many kinds of faith.”(Kant, 2009). Friedrich Schleiermacher, like Kant, does not see religion as a matter of simply following particular dogmatic claims. Schleiermacher proposes that religion is mainly “a matter of intuition or feeling, with the entire universe as its object” (Norton). His theological framework on pluralism reduces the significance of metaphysical and moral claims in the fundamentals of religion. Hegel’s approach, on the other hand, emphasises the impact that diverse historical traditions have on the manifestation of the different forms of religious essence. Theologians and philosophers such as Ernst Troeltsch, W.E. Hocking and Arnold Toynbee have also shared their theological reflections on non-Christian religions (Race 1993, D’Costa 1986).

Various Interpretation of Religious Pluralism

As individual Pluralists propose their theory of religious pluralism on different grounds, the interpretation of this theological position is diverse. Among the many, works of John Hick, S. Mark Heim, Raimundo Pannikar and Paul Knitter are considered influential, and at the same time raised much criticism.

John Hick

John Hick was originally a conservative Christian, but gradually moved to a position of pluralism after encountering people of other faiths. He proposes that each of the world’s religions should be regarded as different, but valid responses to the one ineffable Real (Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 1988). The Real is ineffable as its nature is beyond the scope of human conception. Hick uses Kant’s idea of the noumenal and the phenomenal to explicate that different perception of the divine Real are partly a human projection (Hick, 1995). Hick believes that salvation can be perceived as human transformation from self-centredness to a recentring in the Real (Hick, 1995). Thus religious teachings of any particular religion do not have to be absolute and eternal truth but can be seen as human conception that facilitates our spiritual development; and the similarity in the desired transformed human state suggests a common source of salvific transformation. Hick also criticises the traditional doctrine of the incarnation, he would rather view the incarnation as a metaphor developed by the early church.

Raimundo Panikkar

Panikkar was a Catholic priest, his engagement in the dialogue with Hindus led to his adoption of religious pluralism. He encouraged Christians to be open towards learning about other religious traditions. The crux of Panikkar's argument lies in his claim that there is no universal theory of religion; he denies that the logos is the whole of truth to human conception, there is not one truth; rather, the Real and the logos should be regarded as open-ended; for instance, the expressions of God's Being are merely a representation of the unnameable Absolute. He states that, 'Pluralism is not a theoretical system or an attitude that respects religious diversity, but an attitude that respects the freedom of reality to transcend our systematising efforts to contain and define it. It actively resists the tendency to absolutise any claims to validity.' (Panikkar, 1996) In light of this, Panikkar suggests to give freedom to the Real to manifest itself.

Paul Knitter

Another Catholic theologian, Knitter, moved from the theological position of religious exclusivism to pluralism. When viewing the diversity of the world religions, Knitter states to not claim one being intrinsically better than another, he discourages the universal claims of validity or normativity for any one particular religion over another (Knitter, 1985). In terms of the question of the Ultimate Real, Knitter thinks each of the religions has its own ultimate answer, but deep down, all religions are different paths leading to the same goal (salvation); the different responses to the Real is a result of the differing cultures and contexts of geography and time (Knitter, 1985). In addition, Knitter's pluralistic position presents the idea that religious faiths all have the same origin in the human psyche (Knitter, 1985); the various human conceptions of religion arise from a common psychological process.

S. Mark Heim

Heim is known for proposing a more pluralist pluralism. He critiques that the pluralistic theologies of religions postulate one shared Ultimate Real and a conception of salvation that is applicable to all religions. Heim thinks this type of religious pluralism is in itself insufficiently pluralistic, in light of this, he suggests a multiplicity of salvation (Heim, 1995). According to Heim, the diverse ultimate aims of various religions are significantly established by the corresponding paths taken to attain them; during the process, practitioners are required to adhere to their paths with exclusive commitments on which *Salvations* can be achieved. Heim's hypothesis is constituted on the grounds of, firstly, a philosophical

framework which justifies multiple positionality, and secondly, a historical frame that offers causal argument for his postulation of multiple salvations (Fegert, 2013).

Despite the main focus of Heim's hypothesis, he did also state that, 'This variety of ends and this variety in religious descriptions of the religious object need not undercut the contention that there is one, determinate religious ultimate, so long as that religious object is understood as complex in its nature, with qualities that allow for varied relations with humans.' (Heim, 2000) So here, he constructively suggests that there could be the one Ultimate Real for all religions, but it is inappropriate to reconcile its many interpretations into one comprehensive theory.

Criticism of Religious Pluralism

Pluralism has garnered a variety of critical responses on the different interpretations proposed, the most debated among which is John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. Hick's claim over one shared Ultimate Real and the convergence of soteriological aims toward a single religious end have caused most disagreement. It is argued that the proposed same salvific transformation from self-centredness to the Real-centredness is not sufficient to justify the diverse forms of soteriological paths of different religions. There may be structural similarities in their ultimate aims but religious ends are unlikely to be essentially the same. For instance, in Theravada Buddhism, salvation/liberation is achieved through individual extinction, while Christianity keeps individuality in salvation/liberation. So the core values on which faiths act must be taken into consideration and pluralists must recognise the vast disparity in the religious ends (Hedges, 2010). If differences are often minimised or ignored, in time, the idea of one Real could pose issues on the distinctive identity of the various religions, 'leading to undifferentiated syncretism and the choice between the religious traditions would be rendered arbitrary or meaningless' (Race, 1993). Alan Race also indicates that if all religions are seen as relative, then potential concern lies in distinguishing the spiritually wholesome from the spiritually poor religion (Race, 1993).

In relation to Heim's More Pluralistic Hypothesis, Fegert criticises his historical frame for being insufficiently historical. Heim's causal argument contends that in each religion, there is an essential core that remains constant throughout its history and this essential core fundamentally defines its respective religion and yields respective religious means, leading to the various religious ends (Fegert, 2013). Fegert argues that Heim's hypothesis is influenced by post liberalism's theological posture of essentialism, thus ahistorical. Fegert agrees with

Davaney's assessment that post liberalism offers a truncated historicism that is dependent on an ahistorical essence, hence Heim's historical frame does not account fully for the historical development of religious traditions (Fegert, 2013).

D'Costa, who once promoted and defended the typological framework against critics, came to recognise it as redundant. He argues that 'pluralism must always logically be a form of exclusivism and that nothing called pluralism really exists (D'Costa 1996)'. He sees the logic within the pluralist position being not any different from the exclusivist position, except for the difference in respective truth claims. He contends that when the pluralists hold high value of their own form of truth criteria above other forms, anything not within the scope is considered to have been excluded. This position is parallel to that of the exclusivists (D'Costa 1996).

Religious pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue

The emergence of religious pluralism has had a significant influence on how theologians and philosophers of religion perceive religions other than Christianity. Dialogue between religions is today a religious and human imperative (Coward, 1979). Pluralists have considered exclusivist views as hindrances to genuine interfaith dialogue, and that a more stable ground for interfaith relations is built upon the acknowledgement that other religions are just as valid as one's own (Knitter, 1985). In general, pluralists believe that faith is enriched by dialogue when people of different faiths begin to learn from each other for a better understanding of the Ultimate Reality, whether it is shared or distinctive. Imposing one's own faith on others would not only encourage intolerance but also enhance conflict.

We live in an age of information explosion and religions can no longer be practised in isolation, it is highly likely for one to experience encounters of religions other than one's own on frequent basis, from an interfaith conference to one's neighbour. When practised appropriately, the recognition of religious pluralism could foster better interfaith dialogue. In this regard, Panikkar proposes a number of principles (based on four presuppositions) in his approach to interfaith dialogue. Firstly, true dialogue requires intellectual openness without bias or prejudice. Secondly, dialogue requires a profound loyalty to one's own religion, as dialogue is not merely doctrinal or descriptive but requires the encounter of two or more religious experiences. Finally, the point of encounter in all interfaith dialogue needs to meet on a common ground, and let this common ground be "Christ". "Christ" here denotes Logos

or Being or other terms that the various faiths choose to represent the unnameable Absolute (Coward, 1979).

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