

Encyclopedia of Religious Pluralism

Written by Xuefeng Cui

Broadly speaking, the idea of religious pluralism is a response to the diversity of religious beliefs, practices, and traditions that exist both in the contemporary world and throughout history. Philosophically, within the scope of this article, this term refers to a specific statement that the great world religions are directed towards a transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to a Reality-centeredness.

In history, religious pluralism has ancient roots. The Buddhist emperor Ashoka, in the third century CE, supported all religions equally and urged each to see what is good in the others. In India, the Vedas taught that 'The Real is one, but sages name it variously.' For Islam, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Sufis of Islam had taught that the divine light is refracted through many human lenses. Thus, Ibn al-Arabi suggested, 'Do not attach yourself to any particular creed exclusively, so that you disbelieve all the rest... God, the omnipresent and omnipotent, is not limited to one creed, for he says, 'Wherever you turn, there is the face of Allah' (Qur'an, 2:115)'. Another great Sufi, Jalal ul-din Rumi talked about the religions of his time, 'The lamps are different, but the light is the same.'

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the superiority of Christianity has been questioned as a response to the European Enlightenment. More and more Western people realize that Christianity, as while as Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and other world great religions, is just one part of human civilization. After the second world war, the European colonial hegemony finally ended, and a general awareness came about of globalization, there are three developments which contribute to the emergence of contemporary religious pluralism in the western world. Firstly, there is an explosion of information in the west about world religions. The development of printing and the media industry make the information about great world religions more accessible. Secondly, the travel opportunities enable a large number of Westerners to spend time in non-Christian countries. More importantly, the post-war immigration of other religious people to the Western world. This development makes the people living in many major Western cities be familiar not only with churches and synagogues but also with mosques, gurudwaras, meditation centres, and temples of many kinds. In short, the contemporary religious pluralism is a result of encounter, communication, investigation, and practice of different cultures and traditions.

There are many ways to classify the modern religious responses by philosophers and theologians. The one, which is most commonly adopted within Christian theologies, is the threefold division first introduced by Alan Race (1983): exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Firstly, exclusivism claims that only one tradition teaches the truth and constitutes the way to salvation or liberation. For example, the Christian exclusivism

asserts that salvation is confined to Christianity. Outside the church, there is no salvation, which implies that the Christian religion has superiorities over other religions. Secondly, inclusivism, which has found increasing favour in the second half of the twentieth century, acknowledges only one religion contains the final truth and others contain only approaches to or approximations of it; the privileged religion offers the most effective path to salvation, but those outside it can somehow be saved or liberated. The last option, pluralism, a relative newcomer, claims a single ultimate religious reality is being differently experienced and understood in all the major religious traditions; they all, as far as we can tell, offer equal effective paths to salvation or liberation.

One of the major issues of religious pluralism is the diversity of conflicting belief claims to which the exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist perspectives provide different responses. The exclusivist's idea about the conflicting claims is that only one set of religious claims can be correct. Thus, the only one true set of religious claims is most possibly made by the exclusivist's own tradition, and consequently that all conflicting claims made by other traditions are supposed to be false, while in inclusivism, maintaining the uniqueness of completely truth revelation of one religion, that of other traditions may be true partially. However, in most cases, the objective evidence or set of criteria that used by one religion to make judgements over other religions could be hardly found. Therefore, either exclusivism or inclusivism is lack of grounding for proving the statement of the correctness of her own tradition and of the incorrectness of others' traditions.

More naturally than the exclusivist and inclusivist perspective, pluralists advocate a distinctive approach to the epistemic verification of beliefs. If the objective evidence or universal set of justification criteria could not be found to reconcile the conflicts between different religions, then it is implausible to assert that any one religion could declare to be the only truth, and thus be used to judge over others. With this epistemic approach, the pluralist idea concerning religious conflicts addresses the moral and spiritual aspect of religious diversity, which includes humility regarding the relationship of one's own beliefs and others, and the capability of acceptance of other beliefs. Furthermore, the pluralist position asserts that no one great world religion is superior to other great world religions.

As an exclusivist, William Alston argues that 'In the absence of any external reason for supposing that one of the competing practices is more accurate than my own, the only rational course for me to take is to sit tight with the practice of which I am a master, and which serves me so well in guiding my activity in the world' (Alston 1988, p.444). Philip Quinn agrees with Alston that 'sitting tight' is a rational option, but contends that it is not the only rational option. Quinn holds that internal revision of one's core beliefs in ways that would make them more reliable 'if some refined pluralistic hypothesis were true' is also a rational option (Quinn 2006, p.298).

In responding the challenge of religious pluralism, John Hick, one of the scholars who contribute the most to the pluralist position with significant and influential philosophical approaches, develops the famous pluralistic hypothesis as a comprehensive interpretation of religious diversity. In Hick's religious hypothesis, there are three major aspects or principles: 1) the logic of religious pluralism is the One manifesting as the many transcendent realities experienced in various religions; 2) the instrumental quality of religious experience; 3) the spirituality is identified and validated by the superimposing of one's own criterion upon other religions.

Firstly, in the pluralistic hypothesis, the conceptions of the ultimately real - as the Holy Trinity of Christianity, or as the Allah of Islam, or as the Brahman in Indian religion, and so on, are not identical with the Real-in-itself, but are the one Real as variously humanly thought and experienced in different ways (Hick 1995, p.46). The oldest formulation of this logic is encountered in the Vedic notion of the One that is called by many names (Harold 2000, p.141). Using the Kantian analogy, they are different phenomenal manifestations of the same noumenal Real-in-itself. John Hick's explanation to assume that the great world religions are referring, through their specific concepts of the Gods and Absolutes, to the same ultimate Reality is the striking similarity of the transformed human state described within the different traditions as saved, enlightened, liberated. This similarity strongly suggests a common source of salvific transformation. As a result, the most reasonable hypothesis according to Hick is that of a single ultimate ground of all human salvific transformation rather than of a plurality of such grounds (Hick 1995, p.69). In regarding the major traditions as humanly conditioned responses to the Real, John Hick postulates the ultimate reality should exceed human conception and is thus from his point of view ineffable or formless, which is required to solve the mutually contradictory attributes of Real in various religions. Some philosophers, such as Charles Davis, critic on the attempt of pluralistic hypothesis to reduce all religions to one common universal religion which leads to violation of the principle of freedom (Harold 2000, p.141). But it is probably due to the misunderstanding of the pluralistic hypothesis. In according to John Hick, although each of the great world religion is a response to the ultimate Real, and that each is a context of human salvation, they are supposed to respond as fully as possible to the Real in their own way by devoutly living out their own tradition (Hick 1995, p.41) This is to say that pluralistic hypothesis leaves the different traditions intact, and respect them as authentic contexts of salvation/liberation with their own unique character and historical particularities.

Secondly, by understanding religious teachings are not absolute and eternal truth but are human ideas, the religious doctrines of the great world religions are, more specifically, the tools by which the One is reached. Each of them can help people to move through stages of their spiritual growth towards the goal of enlightenment, liberation, or salvation. This is the case, in Buddhist teaching, the view of religious doctrines, both its own and others, as 'skillful means'(upaya) enable people to move in different ways towards the salvific transformation of enlightenment. By analogy, all religions are the 'boat' to help one across the river of karma-samsara to

enlightenment on the other side. But once the goal is reached, the boat was employed is left behind. Similarly, in Hinduism, the Vedas are the 'ladder' by which Brahman is reached. But when the soul has been released, and the instrumental function of the Vedic ladder has been accomplished, the Veda is no longer required. Understood in this way, although the great world religions still vary in their claims and manifestations, they could be revised as a collection of instrumental means by which the Real may be reached, thereby, makes them be compatible with the pluralist hypothesis.

Thirdly, in rejecting the superiority imposed by one religion over others, the pluralistic hypothesis advocates equality among different religions while keeping their identity and difference intact. Specifically, in response to Christian's superimposition, given 'You will know them by their fruits', said Jesus, asking 'Are grapes gathered from thistles, or figs from thistles?' (Matthew 7.16), Hick realizes that the fruit of the spirit and moral which St Paul listed as 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Gal. 5.22-3) do not occur more abundantly among Christians than among Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and so on. In other words, there is no observable evidence can prove the Christian's moral superiority over other religions. In addition, Hick believes that Christian religious experience, as well as other religious experience, is not purely a projection but is at the same time a cognitive response to a transcendent reality. This is based on the Kantian distinction between noumenon and phenomenon; that is, although the Real can be experienced in a range of gods and absolutes as phenomena of religious experience, it cannot be epistemologically projected by human conception. In conclusion, the religious pluralism proposes in realizing the moral and spiritual fruits seem to be although different, similarly valuable, the noumenal Real-in-itself is capable of being humanly thought and experienced (phenomenal manifested) in more than one way. Therefore, according to Hick, it is much more plausible to suppose that the different conceptions of great world religions are different manifestations of ineffable Real-in-itself than to claim that only one of the salvific traditions, namely one's own, has a true conception of the Real.

As a result, religious pluralism always suggest that we can benefit by sharing our specific understanding of tradition with one another, and such sharing and learning can result in spiritual growth and enrichment of one's own religion, while the alternative attempting to attack or degrade other religions, has frequently produced both internal stagnation and often violent interreligious conflict. Therefore, the greatest threat, both in the history and today, to the creative contribution of pluralism to religion is the reaction of the militant exclusivism (e.g. Christian, Hindu or Islamic fundamentalism). As a matter of fact, despite the philosophical and theological dispute, it should be true that the acceptance of differences in the context of mutual respect and appreciation is embraced by both human nature and divine nature, while egocentric narrow-mindedness is always destructive and is the opposite of true religion in any tradition.

Bibliography

1. Hick, John. *The Rainbow of Faiths : Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism*. London: SCM Press, 1995.
2. Hick, John. *God Has Many Names*. Philadelphia : Westminster Press, 1980.
3. Coward, Harold G. *Pluralism in the World Religions : A Short Introduction*. Oxford: One World, 2000.
4. Griffiths, Paul J. *Problems of Religious Diversity*. Exploring the Philosophy of Religion ; 1. Oxford ; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
5. Cohn-Sherbok, Knitter, Cohn-Sherbok, Dan, and Knitter, Paul F. *The Myth of Religious Superiority : Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism*. Faith Meets Faith. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005.
6. Hick, John *Religious Pluralism* , in M. Eliade (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1987.
7. Barnes Norton, Michael. *Pluralism, Religious* | *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/rel-plur/>. [Accessed 27 December 2017].