

Approaches to the Philosophical Problems of Religious Pluralism

Mohasina Khatun

Research Scholar, Dept. of Philosophy, Vidyasagar University

ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Article History Published Online: 15 January 2021	<i>Religion is an important constituent of human culture and values, but it plays an ambivalent role in our lives and society. Though its core business is to build, sustain and promote peace and love throughout the globe, it can by deviation be a powerful source of violence. But, there are different approaches to the problems of religious pluralism. In the contemporary world where a clash of civilization is seen as an important threat to peace and religious diversity and religious confrontation is seen as an important cause of that clash. Religious pluralism is and has long been a fact of social life. The fact that there is plurality of religious traditions, each with its own distinctive beliefs, spiritual practices, ethical outlook, art forms, and cultural ethos, creates an obvious problem for those of us who see them, not simply as human phenomena. Therefore it is evident that we live in a pluralistic world with regard to religious beliefs. While this has always been the case throughout world history, it is all the more evident today with the advent of instant communication, world travel and globalization. It is no longer possible to live in ignorance. This paper will show how the enlightenment was expected to bring about the decline of religion but the opposite has been the case with a renewed interest in all of the world religions.</i>
Keywords Religion, Diversity, Pluralism, Transcendental, Peace.	
*Corresponding Author Email: mohasinakhatun01[at]gmail.com	

Religion is one of the most important urges of human beings, because it addresses our existential issues such as salvation, death, fear, sacred, profane, etc., hence it cannot be ignored. Vivekananda says,

Religious thought is in man's very constitution, so much so that it is impossible for him to give up religion until he can give up his mind and body, until he can stop thought and life. As long as a man thinks, this struggle must go on, and so long man must have some form of religion. Thus we see various forms of religion in the world. (CWV, pp.203-204)

But religion plays an ambivalent role in our life and society. On the one hand its core business is to build, sustain and promote peace and love throughout the globe; on the other, it can be a powerful source of violence.

Perhaps the most natural position for a believer in a particular religion to take is that the truth lies with her own religion and that any religion holding opposing views is false. Indeed the easiest way to dispose of all the questions concerning religious diversity is to deny it altogether. Only one religion is true and the other so-called religions are false and do not really deserve to be called 'religions'. Thus this dogmatic view considers as false whatever denies its own assertions. 'Exclusivism' generally regards other faiths as products of sin and evil forces to be overcome. Historically religious exclusivism is related to tendency of family and tribal societies to view outsiders as inferiors, as enemies and even as less than truly human. Exclusivism is most prevalent in Abrahamic religions. These religions regard ordinarily all other religious claims as fake and invalid. For example in Christianity, religious exclusivism is seen in both Roman Catholic doctrine and in Protestantism. At the council of Florence it was affirmed that,

No one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not just Pagan; but also Jews or heretics or schematics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to the "everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angles", unless before the end of the life they are joined to the church. (Hick, 2006, p.6)

Religious exclusivism naturally linked with a doctrine of salvation and teaches that only the member of one religion or sect will reach Heaven, while others will be doomed to eternal damnation. Thus exclusivists think that their religion is the only way for salvation. They position themselves in regard to the other as people who are responsible for introducing the correct religion to the other. In this view, the other is the one to be invited to salvation rather than merely a partner in interfaith dialogue. He should accept the invitation, convert to the religion that will save him and leave his past life behind. Similarly, Christian exclusivists call with the intention of salvations via Christ alone. It is by earnings of an individual knowledge of commitment to Christ with the intention of receives assurance of salvation. The non-believers cannot receive such assurance given with the intention of they are neither mindful of the uniqueness of Christ neither do they acknowledge his lordship.

Because by exceeding a fine barrier this view naturally leads to fanaticism and strife which are dangerous and harmful for the welfare and unity of society. Additionally exclusivism has at least two difficulties. First, there is the practical difficulty that hundreds of thousands of people live and die in other religions and cultures without ever having heard of the path of salvation taught by a particular exclusivistic religion. The second difficulty for an exclusivistic religion arises as we become acquainted with other religions and the lives of their founders and 'saints'. One finds individuals whose lives exhibit profound ethical commitment and religious devotion. That they

are not loved by God seems dubious. All religions provide a sense of community to their followers, in which brotherhood and universal values are preached to help in the quest for personal and collective salvation. However, a religious group may achieve collective identity at the expense of outsiders. Those belonging to a particular religion may define themselves against those who do not accept their own views.

Correspondingly, in predominately Hindu India, ethical notions of universal dharma and metaphysical Brahman provided inclusivistic frameworks for understanding other faith perspectives. A few Hindu thinkers have begun to claim in recent years that their religion covers so vast a metaphysical spectrum that virtually every ideal found in other religions has already a counterpart in their own religion. Jainism and Buddhism, too, emphasized non-violence towards all, including in the realm of religious beliefs. Some Muslim theologians argue that historically Islam is God's most recent revelation, so Judaism and Christianity are not false religions but are 'preparations' for the final revelation of the prophet Muhammad. But Christianity, especially Roman Catholic Church is excellent case study to illustrate this approach. At one time, the Vatican taught that 'outside the church there is no salvation', embracing a position of theological exclusivism; however, ever since the second Vatican council (1962-1965). Inclusivism has been the official position of the Roman Catholicism. Therefore Christian inclusivist affirms the centrality of salvation through Jesus while also maintaining the universality of God's plan to save sinners.

But the inclusivism approach is found generally offensive or at least irritating by most people, because it tends to undermine the special identity and uniqueness of every religion other than one's own. My own religion is broad enough to include all other religions. Such rhetoric is clearly not a pointer to peace, individual or collective. Additionally this approach is seen as arrogantly exclusivist, if observed starting the viewpoint of other religions. For example from Christian perspective Hindu are not saved by their dharma, and Muslims are not saved by their works, but all are saved unaware by Christ. This not only proves with the intention of salvation doctrine of all other religions are fake but also with the intention of people are not saved due to the fact of following the religious road of their religious conviction.

Many thinkers have posited the essential unity of the religions and have attempted to reconcile formal religious antagonisms under an array of different philosophical and theological canopies. The transcendent unity of religion that posed from traditionalist view is one of these endeavours. The traditionalist or perennialist perspective began to be enunciated in the 1920; by the French philosopher Rene Guenon and, in the 1930s, by Frithjof Schuon himself. The Harvard orientalist Ananda Coomaraswamy and the Swiss art historian Titus Burckhardt also became prominent advocates of this point of view. Fundamentally, this doctrine is the Santana Dharma- the eternal religion of Hindu Neo- Vedantins.

At the present moment all religions contain mixture of truth, which is divine and error which is human. The essential of all religions are the same. There is difference only in the non-essential. The apparent differences in religions are due to a misconception of the followers. The conflicting points are all due to misconception and misconstruction of truth on account of prejudice, bigotry, lack of purity of heart and subtlety and

purity of intellect and perverted condition of the intellect of people. All prophets are messengers of God. They are great souls who have had divine, intuitive perception of God. Their words are infallible and sacred. Truth is neither Hindu nor Muslim, nor Buddhist nor Christian, Truth is one, homogenous, eternal substance. According to these background followers of the transcendent unity of religions theory believe that religion is presented as having two related aspects and issue of unity and diversity in religions can be converted into two spiritual types: esoteric and exoteric. Therefore the exoteric aspect reveals the diverse, the different, whereas the esoteric contains the same, the essential. It is the unifying core, the summit which all paths lead and at which they all converge.

Coomaraswamy takes an ethical stance to argue that all great religions of the world have valid claims to truth, which must be respected and understood in a comparative mode and not just tolerated. Asserting the necessity of this approach for cross-religious understanding, Coomaraswamy writes,

The greatest of modern Indian Saints actually practiced Christian and Islamic disciplines, that is worshiped Christ and Allah, and found that all lead to the same goal; he could speak from experience of the equal validity of all these 'ways', and feel the same respect for each, while still preferring for himself the one to which is whole being was naturally attuned by nativity, temperament and training. (qtd in Akkach, 2012, p.6)

The doctrine of the Transcendent unity of Religions can be summarized according to the following formula provided by Firth of Schuon in his book of the same name,

Pure and absolute Truth can only be found beyond all its possible expressions: these expressions, as such, cannot claim the attributes of this Truth; their relative remoteness from it is expressed by their differentiation and multiplicity, by which they are, strictly limited. (Schuon, 2005, p.161)

To illustrate the difference between metaphysical and theological knowledge, and indirectly to emphasize the unity of religions, Schuon uses the metaphor of light. Metaphysics discloses universal truths, whereas theology discloses divine revelations, which are but particular expressions of the universal truths. Philosophy is further removed from theology in that it deals with rational concepts, religions, thus viewed; translate universal truths, into dogmatic languages that are accessible by the wider public through faith. But the colourful variations of the dogmatic beliefs fade at the level of universal truths where all religious differences disappear. In brief, the reality of the transcendent unity of religions is shown to reside in the oneness of the Truth that governs all modes of manifestation and existence.

The history of the encounters among adherents of different religions has taken the form of conflict, diatribe and even hatred. One of the most important causes is the tendency of religious sentiment to be strengthening among adherents of different religions. Consequently, the conflict between Israel and Palestine and the world of Arab continues. Revivalism of Biblical Christian groups in Latin America, rivalry among Moslems and Christians in Africa, Conflict between secularist and clergymen in Turkey, conflict of Hindu's fundamentalist facing adherents of different religions in India, the war of religious group in Afghanistan and Iraq are all examples.

Basically, diversity stands as a hallmark of contemporary culture in the modern world, and it is no less significant in religion than elsewhere. Here in a society that consisted of many different groups such as religion, culture as well as group of interest, every people have their own orientation. Due to this fact, conflicts between religions have spread larger in every society.

Based on problems above, religious scholars carved out religious pluralism as a problem solving in their field of religious relationship. Religious pluralism is a term form religious diversity that imputes positive meaningful to religion and encourages appreciation of religion's many forms. Many pluralists argue that all religions have their own religious teaching. The problem of religious, pluralism actually arises from the fact that there are many such claims. In the view of this variety of truth claims, it would seem that they cannot be true; and in that case many they not very well all be false. An alternative that will explore here, use to the experiential apologetic rejects the assumption that only one of the different religious beliefs systems can be true.

Religious pluralism is often used as synonym for religious tolerance, although the two concepts have distinct meanings. Religious tolerance implies that each person is entitled to their own set of beliefs without judgment conformity to some cultural or societal standard. While religious pluralism includes tolerance it is a more broad term that asserts that possible religious truth and values exist in many different doctrines, not solely that of the particular individual some theologians argue that an omniscient deity, such as God, created all of the religions in order to speak to people in ways that most appeal or relate to their circumstances in life. As such, even though their customs are different, they are all from the sole source. As a theological argument, religious pluralism suggests that if all religion is from the same original source, then all must be possessing of similar truth. This argument stresses the similarities between religions, often citing common stories, figures and doctrines. Thus the pluralistic approach not only acknowledge religious diversity but also accepts that each religion is completely valid according to its own terms and concern actually the pluralistic standpoint attempts to accept others as they are since there is no generally accepted criterion to distinguish between the true and falsehood of different religious systems, it is important that the followers of such systems should admit that other systems are true in their own way. Suggesting that all religions have truth and value causes considerable problems for religions that preach an exclusivist idea.

In short, this is like that all traditions are culturally conditioned response to the 'same' ultimate reality still, how can all traditions be experiencing the real when their conceptions of the real are divers and contradictory? Hick resolves this dilemma by borrowing from the thought of Immanuel Kant who distinguishes between Nominal world, the world as it exist unperceived, and phenomenal world, the same world as humanly perceived, with all the difference that act of perception makes. Here Hick applies Kant's distinction to religious phenomena and proposes a distinction between the real and situation, as it actually exists, and the real as perceived and experienced by individuals in a particular tradition.

This approach is explained by Ramakrishna a nineteenth century Indian Saint and his disciple Swami Vivekananda with different analogies, such as the analogy of reaching the roof through different ways, either by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a bamboo pole and the analogy of going to Dakshineshwara by carriage, by boat, by steamer or an foot. You will choose the way according to your convenience and taste, but the destination for all is the same. Some of you will arrive earlier than other, but all win arrive. Ramakrishna not only advocated this idea and a theoretical level, but, following Christian and Islamic ways of worship and reaching the realization of Christ and Mohammed respectively, he showed us this is a fact rather than a fiction. In other well-known and often quoted words, Swamy Vivekananda following his master's way says:

I accept all the religions that were in the past and worship them I worship good with every one of them; in whatever form they worship him. I shall go to the mosque of Mohammedan, I shall enter the Christians church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhist temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and his law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to find the light which enlightens the heart of every one. (Vivekananda, 1988, p.374)

To conclude, I would like to say, there are some criticisms about this attitude. One famed criticisms is that if religions pluralism holds that all religious are true, then problems arise. For, if all religions are true, then since traditional Christianity is a religion, traditional Christianity must be true. And if traditional Christianity is true, then Jesus is the only way to God. But if Jesus is the only way to God, religious pluralism is false. According to this criticism religious pluralism is another variant of exclusivism itself.

References

1. Akkach, S. (2012). *Cosmology and Architecture in Problem Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Islam*, New York: State University of New York Press.
2. Ali Ihsan Y. (2007). Swami Vivekananda's Idea of Religious Diversity and Harmony, *Journal of Religious Culture*.
3. Hick, J. (2006). *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age*, London: Westminster John Knox Press.
4. John, H. (1989). *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Response to Transcendent*, New York: Yale University Press.
5. R. Scott. (2000). *Ambivalence of the Sacred*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
6. Schuon, F. (2005). *The Essential of Frithjof Schuon*, London: World Wisdom.
7. Vivekananda, S. (1988). *The Complete Works of Vivekananda*, Vol. IV, Kolkata: Advaita Ashra.
8. Vivekananda, S. (1988). *The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol –II. Discovery Publishers.