

Religion and Pluralism

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, living in multi-religious societies can be very problematic to some people. As we are living in multi-racial and multi-religious societies, we have to face the problem of every religious as the claimant of truth. Yet, if every religion is true, then none of them is true actually. And this is impossible. To solve this problem, many philosophers have offer their outstanding theories. One of them is John Hick who puts forward the idea of pluralism. Yet, can pluralism solve the issue of every religion as a claimant of truth? This article will critically evaluate Hick's idea of pluralism as well as exclusivism and inclusivism ideas.

ABSTRAK

Dalam suasana dunia tanpa sempadan ini hubungan timbal balik di antara pelbagai agama telah menjadi suatu corak kehidupan yang lumrah. Setiap agama mengakui bahawa mereka adalah pembawa kebenaran. Jikalau semua agama membawa kebenaran maka semua agama adalah benar dan tidak ada agama yang tidak benar. Kenyataan ini juga akan membawa maksud bahawa jikalau semua agama benar maka semua agama juga boleh bermakna tidak benar. Jikalau semua agama membawa kebenaran, maka kenapa kita perlu memilih apa yang kita percayai selama ini dan meninggalkan yang lain? Rencana ini akan menyorot secara filosofikal dan kritis terhadap sejauh mana ampuhnya penyelesaian terhadap persoalan agama seperti yang disarankan oleh pendukung aliran pluralisme khususnya yang dianjurkan oleh Profesor John Hick), serta aliran eksklusivisme dan inklusivisme.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, living in multi-religious societies can be very problematic to some people. The situation might not a problematic if we are living in a remote society which is far from having any contact with any other religion. What we know about God and truth is through the only religion that our society and we adhere to. Then, there is no need for us to squabble whether which is the only God and truth, because we already agreed as to what we have decided about the fact of our God and truth. But, of course, this sort of idea is too idealistic because we cannot find almost anywhere in the world nowadays

that any particular society which has had no contact with another society who has a different faith and different belief. In fact if one refers to historical religious facts one will be told that human beings, along with their life history, have innumerable gods with different names and different characteristics. A collection of names of Mesopotamian gods made by A. Deinel in 1914 contains 3300 entries (Romer 1969: 117-18). In Hesiod's time there were said to be 30 000 deities (Hume [1757] 1956: 28, n. 1). And if one could list all the past and present gods and goddesses of India, such as Agni, Vayu, Surya, Aryaman, Aditi, Mitra, Indra, Varuna, Brahma, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Shiva, Kali, Ganesh...and of the Near East, such as Osiris, Isis, Horus, Re, Yahweh, Baal, Moloch, An, Enlil, Ea, Tiamat, Enki, Marduk...and of southern Europe such as Zeus, Kronos, Hera, Apollo, Dionysus, Hephaestus, Poseidon, Aphrodite, Hermes, Mars, Athena, Pan...and of northern Europe, such as Odin, Thor, Balder, Vali, Freyr, Frigg, Woden, Rheda, Erce, Donar, Fosite...and of Africa, such as Nabongo, Luhanga, Ngai, Nyama, Amaomee, Lesa, Ruhanga, Kolo, Nyambe, Imana, Kimbumba, Molimo, Ohe...and also of the Americans, Australasia, northern Asia and the rest of the world they would probably form a list as bulky as the telephone directory of a large city (John Hick 1989:233-4).

If so many gods are to be considered, then, of course so many faith and belief have to be considered too. The question is; which stand should we take?

THE PROBLEM OF MULTI-RELIGION

It is very important for a body of knowledge to prove itself as a claimant of truth. Whether a form of study is to be considered as important depend so much on its ability to produce at the end of its investigation about some claims to truth. This is what make the study of religion has been regarded to be important because the religion itself as a form of study is the possible claimant of truth. The main issue in the study of religion is about the nature of reality. In this case, every religion always claims that it can provide the actual/accurate explanation about the nature of reality. It was believed that what people thought as true about the reality is not necessarily true.

To say that the study of religion is the study of agent of truth means that we are dealing with the main issue. It is further more than just the thought of religion as a festival's agent. Of course, there will be a time where religion ask its adherents make a celebration but it is not the premier thing in religion. To make the thing worse, adherents in many religions nowadays tend to think that the only thing in religion is the celebration. The serious topic as the claim to truth that religion looks although it is no big deal any more. This is completely an ignorant.

Thus, the important issue in religion is more than just the social practices. The issue of religion as a claimant of truth is important to be considered. But,

in a world of multi-racial as we lives nowadays means we have to admit that we are also dealing, whether we like it or not, with the issue of multi-religion. And this means, we as an adherent of a particular religion have to think of what the adherent from other religions talk about from their religious point of views. In other words, if we claim that our religion tells us the truth, then, they also will claim that their religions tell them the truth even though it will be very different from what has been told to us by our religion. So, multi-religion means multi-truth. This is certainly the real problem that we have to face nowadays as we are now living in the borderless world and in the era of information explosion where we will soon find out that the God we are worshipping is not the same with our friend's God.

The main issue here is among the many asserted truths which one should be considered as the real truth. To put it in another way, if one claims that his or her religion is true, then, it means that one is asserting that other religions are false. Can one say that when God reveals in one religion means that God ignores the believers from other religions even though they are sincere in their believes. These are the fundamental issues in any religion. As a result, the existence of religions other than ours can jeopardize our faith on our own religion. May be this is one of the reasons for the person to convert from one religion to the other. And may be to some extents there are people who reject the notion of religion at all.

One related but interesting question with the problem that we are now discussing is; why if one born in Saudi Arabia he or she will be most likely to be a Muslim compare to one who born in England where he or she will surely be a Christian? This situation may be can tell us that the conception of deity that we are called on to accept or reject is rooted in social conditions. The system of belief held by people in one social condition is a product of one particular religion. As a result, we can hardly have an objective conception of God that can be accepted by anybody in any place and at any time. In short, there is no neutral conception of God between religions.

Thus, what is the stance we should take in facing this problem? Can we adore to the stance where we will assert that ours are right and all of those who have different point of views with us are wrong? This can hardly settle the problems of every religion are offering the truths. This stance is what can be termed as exclusivism. Exclusivism can be defined as:

One's own tradition is the exclusive beneficiary of a vital gift or discovery-salvation, blessing, truth-so that humankind beyond its borders lacks that all important good (John Hick 1985:3-24).

If we accept the exclusivism as a means to settle down the problem of multi-religion claiming multi-truth we certainly have to accept its effect as:

The Hindu tradition is the guardian of the sanatana dharma, the eternal truth; the Jews are God's chosen people, living in special covenant relationship with God; Buddhism

is the teaching of the Enlightened One, whose influence makes enlightenment possible throughout the earth; Christianity, uniquely, was founded by God in person, incarnate in Jesus the Christ; and Islam is the latest and fullest divine revelation, taking up into itself and fulfilling all earlier revelations (John Hick 1985:3-24).

This means my concepts are mine and your concepts are yours. Yet, this attitude can scarcely settle the problem of whether we can have one objective concept for all of us. Thus, exclusivism is not very helpful to be applied.

At this point may be one form of pluralism seems very plausible to be adored to. Pluralism, as John Hick, the champion of the pluralism, puts it in his hypothesis, is 'the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcend all our varied visions of it' (John Hick 1989:233-4). It is clear that from Hick pluralistic hypothesis, pluralism contains many faiths and all of them are admitted as true. The different is merely the way of expressing the faith. In other words, pluralism believes in one divine Reality with many ways of worshipping. As a result all religions are considered as valid. Does that means that a person can go to the mosque on Friday, to the synagogue on Saturday, and to the church on Sunday because he or she will perform different way of worshipping on those days for the same divine Reality? Indeed, it looks like nothing wrong with it. But, this also does not make sense because it begs a question of why we need to have a different sacred building with different name to worship the very same God.

Perhaps one strong reason why pluralism very tempting is because of all faiths are considered as equally valid, then, it will allow us to respect them all and at the same time we admit that they are expressing truth. This means we believe that God reveals Himself (or Herself or itself) in every religion. This policy certainly can be a hidden way of saying that a particular conception of God sets the standard. The effect from this policy is clear that we are asserting that a believer of other faith is actually has the same system of belief like us. A Muslim, for example, who has already decided that Muslim God truly exist, may wish to say that the system of beliefs other than Islam also provide the path to the very same God. This means the system of beliefs other than Islam is also Islam. Then, believers from the other religions are 'anonymous Muslims'

So, people do not need to declare themselves as Muslims in order to be Muslims. And people also do not need to be baptized in order to be Christians. This means all the ritual features in all religions become meaningless. We do not need to have any particular sacred building as a representative symbol of religion any more. And, to admit all paths to truth as true will eventually to admit no path to truth at all. It is not clear how we can have any notion of ultimate destination if we do not have any path to it. Thus, the notion of religion seems to be in danger in the hand of pluralism.

What make so many people still attracted by the pluralist's policy is because we are now living in the mobile society where we can find many faiths in just one society. So, we need a policy that can make people respect everyone's right. Pluralism with its policy that different religions have equal place seems very diplomatic where people have freedom to make their own decision which religion they want to devote themselves to. The existence of human freedom for pluralism is a pre-condition for the policy of equal place of different religions.

Through this policy pluralism hopes that people can choose what they regard as true in religion. It seems very simple from the pluralism point of view for people to choose a particular religion rather than others. But it is not that easy in the real situation. The assertion that people can have freedom to choose the religion of their own may gives us an explanation that there are many religions exist in the human society but in many societies the choice between religions is scarcely a real one. We cannot forget the fact that we are born in a particular tradition or another where there is already exists a set of belief patterned by a particular system of belief. As a result:

It may be possible for those in advanced Western societies to pick and choose between religion but that has not been the normal human experience, and still not so in many areas (Roger Trigg 1988:51).

May be what pluralists mean by human freedom here is supposed to be more than human free will. This means that individuals can decide freely not just what to believe but they can also decide what will be the truth. Therefore, from the pluralists' point of view, beside so many paths to truth, human beings can also have many truths. Again we will be dragged into the pool of relativism. This is because of claiming that there are many truths instead of one objective truth can surely lead us to admit the idea that it is true that there is no truth as true. In other words, pluralists surely advocate the idea that since the reality consists of many realities, then, there is no reality at all. But, as I have mentioned above, since pluralists' idea encourage toleration between people, it is hardly surprising when people are still attracted by the very ideal of pluralism.

The fact that pluralism rejects the notion of an objective truth is clear from our discussion above. It can be understood that why pluralists reject the idea of an objective truth is because they certainly cannot accept the reality that they may be wrong in what they believe in and devoting themselves so far. In short, they cannot accept that there will be what shall be termed as the wrong faith. It is so paradoxical if one is willing to sacrifice himself or herself for what could be a deception. So, it is illogical to relate any possibility of error in the realm of religious faith. The only way out for the pluralists is to admit that all religions are true.

Yet, they still cannot afford to run away from the real problem in the real life that everyone will be too ready to admit that their only religion have the

information of the real truth. If one claims that one knows the truth and very confidence with one's knowledge about the truth, then, what we can expect from this person is surely he or she will try to tell anybody who do not share the same knowledge with his or her knowledge. And in this process of telling the truth one also try to impose what one happens to belief to the others. This is the logical consequence from this situation because if otherwise, then, what kind of people we are if we know the truth but we still leave other people to live their lives on the wrong paths.

At this point, when we are confronting with those who have deep loyalty to faiths that we do not share, we certainly cannot afford to ignore them because they claim that they have the truth will demand our attention. But, in this situation the truth cannot be guaranteed either in their side or in our own. What can be done by both parties are trying to learn the differentiation between them. As we may learn something from them, they might learn something from us as well. This can bring the idea of dialogue between religions which is a very important factor to provide mutual understanding. But, we cannot anticipate too much from any kind of dialogue between religions because of the fact that the differences cannot necessarily be reconciled. As we cannot consider that reality is the private property of one religion, then, we cannot conceive it as a combination of beliefs as well.

Thus, pluralism's main objective is not to accept the notion of an objective reality but it tries to be a champion as a campaigner of toleration. Yet this policy is also contentious because it is not clear whether pluralists can show us where is the logical point of toleration lies when one side in a dispute is right and the other is wrong. It is crystal clear that this situation is not going to be as tolerated as pluralists anticipate it. If we take a careful look at the pluralists' program of having a negative point of view towards the ideas of truth and reality, it is clear that what they actually want to say is human beings will never can claim that they have knowledge about reality and truth. In other words, what is real and what is true depend on human knowledge about them. There are no reality and no truth outside human knowledge.

This means pluralists are not just advocating the toleration of mistakes but also the pedigreed independence to decide what should count as true. Therefore, pluralists' idea is head on with the realists' idea where in the end there will be nothing different between pluralism and relativism. This situation explained clearly by Professor Trigg (1988:52):

They thus embrace with enthusiasm opposition to realism. Claims to truth and knowledge cannot then be allowed to have the universal implications which a realist would insist on. Our truth may not be your truth, and pluralism can become a synonym for relativism.

According to pluralists, human beings certainly cannot have knowledge about reality and truth as have been put forward by realists. This is due to the

fact of what they call as human fallibility. Human beings have finite minds and by that very reason it is impossible for human beings to grasp infinite reality and infinite truth. If human beings try to grasp human beings, then, in the position of confronting the reality that surpasses their understanding. Thus, human beings cannot go over the limit that placed in all humans, and if they still try to surpass this limit, then, human beings will be involved into disagreement between them as a consequence. Pluralists will conclude that it is impossible for human beings to have any knowledge of transcendent reality. As a result, pluralists will arrive at the place where they have to say that there is no reality at all.

Pluralists' conclusion can be very dangerous for the position of religion in the world. They have, whether they are aware or not, changed their view from very positive that it can be possible for the religions to have their places in the world to the very negative point of view where there cannot be any religion in the world at all. Due to the fact that human beings only have finite viewpoint and certainly cannot go beyond it, they have to allow the policy of the alternative views of the same reality. In other words, if we want the complete explanation about the nature of transcendent bringing all religions together might be the best way for that. This means every religion has a piece of complete explanation about the nature of the transcendent. Thus, the position of every religion here is really interconnected because they need each other in order to provide a complete explanation about the nature of transcendent. Yet, surely in this situation a believer of one religion needs to know the insights of other religions if he or she wants to know the complete explanation of the nature of the transcendent. Then, every one of us need to be a member of every religion and this is impossible because how one can be a member of two religions which compete each other for the different reality. Certainly, the theory says that all religions grip aspects of the same reality is driven itself to self-defeating and interrelated to an optimistic point of view because of the fact we cannot deny that there are deep disagreements between them.

Anybody who accepts the idea that all religions confront the same reality has to accept that in the end cannot all of them is right. Some of them are certainly mistaken. We can share this problem with the problem of many scientific theories are on offer at one time in the development of science, as a comparison. Even though they are so many alternative theories can be used but it does not mean that a scientist will be too ready to accept the theory which he or she disagree with, even though it is a colleague's theory. Every problem in science needs to be resolved and the most precise theory is needed. Yet, if scientists keep on in toleration for continued disagreement, then, it does not matter which theory shall be used because any theory will be as good as any others.

We shall have the same situation in the sphere of religion if too much toleration and the welcoming the differences are adored. They can lead us to

the conclusion that it does not matter which religion we believe in. And this conclusion will certainly lead us to the view that it does not matter whether we have a religious belief at all. In the situation where so many religious options are on offer and one can freely choose what to believe, then one may ask why one must choose to believe to any of them at all. In the end, truth is out of one grasp at all.

IS PLURALISM REALLY DIFFERENT FROM EXCLUSIVISM?

We have recognized pluralism and exclusivism so far, but if one follows widely used typology, there is one more position we can have, namely the inclusivism. Inclusivism is a position: Inclusivists try to claim that only one religion provides definitive truth but that other religions provide opportunities for truth and therefore salvation in a less complete way' (Roger Trigg 1988:58). For the inclusivists we may ask why we need to devote ourselves to a particular religion if all other religions also provide opportunities for truth? It is not clear why inclusivism so significant to be embraced. Pluralism, with its do-called 'open-minded mission' to alternative religions and their claims, tries to avoid those two positions.

No matter how open-minded they may look, the pluralists cannot deny that the main task they have is making judgements of truth and the real problem for them in this task is the matter of which judgements are to be made. Similar with any religion, pluralism is also a 'substantive position claiming truth and excluding certain positions' (Roger Trigg 1988:57). Thus, whether they are aware or not, the pluralists have already classified themselves as a form of exclusivism. It seems that there can be no pluralism at all due to the fact that, as Gavin D'Costa (1996:225) says, the pluralists is also a group which is committed to holding some forms of truth criteria. The implication of this position is anything that cannot be classified under such criteria will not be counted as truth.

It is hardly surprising when pluralism has to avoid some views other than religion such as Nazi views and a kind of cult that encourages mass suicide. This is because pluralism actually already has a set of criteria of what religion should be. In other words, pluralism tacitly has a view of what should be counted as truth. Again Gavin D'Costa (1996:226) explains this position:

If any pluralist were to claim that they did not operate with any such exclusive criteria, they would be unable to distinguish between any two claims to revelation or truth such as the claims of the confessing Church and those of the German Christians following Hitler. Such pluralism would therefore be entirely unable to distinguish between true and false claims to revelation. It is very difficult to find a pluralist who would go to this extreme.

Thus, for the sake of meaningfulness pluralism cannot avoid being shaded with exclusivism and any effort to declare the independence of pluralism from

a stained of exclusivism will drag it into meaninglessness. Pluralism cannot afford to escape from making any exclusivist claims because otherwise, it will have to take a position where pluralism must accept all claims to revelation, however irreconcilable and morally obnoxious. In the end, this position will lead pluralism to deny the efficaciousness of any revelation. Accepting anything as revelation will merely end up with accepting nothing as revelation. In short, this is a position of denying that there is such thing as revelation.

This means, pluralism has to accept the reality that it is in the very position of claiming something, and this could logically put pluralism in the same position as exclusivism. Pluralism certainly cannot declare that it includes anything and leave nothing out because, as a result, this will make it an empty view. Pluralist then cannot differentiate between human's statement and God's revelation or between a clear religious proposition and sheer gibberish. It is a fact that when they have a dialogue with the proponents of a particular religion which is of course have their own criteria for truth, pluralists always using their own criteria that they already have.

As a champion of religious pluralism, Hick's reaction on Gavin D'Costa's position is can clearly be expected. Hick utterly criticizes D'Costa because for him, religious exclusivism and religious pluralism are 'of different logical kinds, the one being a self-committing affirmation of faith and the other a philosophical hypothesis' (John Hick 1997:163). But, this does not provide the space of reconciliation between exclusivism and pluralism. In fact, exclusivism will be on a conflict course with the pluralism if it is regarded as a claim to truth rather than an expression of personal commitment.

Hick believes compare to the naturalistic point of view, the data from the history of religions can be explained better by the pluralism, and this means that it provides us the decisive hypothesis about the kind of world we live in. Thus, Hick's statement can lead us to the conclusion that pluralism is a substantive metaphysical position which like exclusivism operates in the same logical space. In other words, pluralism is in the same logical position as any exclusivism. This means, pluralism considers the world we are living is the place of not to sanction any particular religion but certainly will be too ready to welcome the general religious attitude. And in the same time pluralism prevents exclusivism from claiming truth for a particular religion and ruling out the truth of others.

As we have seen before that pluralism will be dragged into the pool of relativism because of its approval to the view that beliefs is culturally and socially conditioned. Then, it is hardly surprising when pluralists like John Hick will be too ready to say that one's religion is a product of one's upbringing. Hick (1989:2) asserts this point of view clearly:

It is evident that in some ninety-nine percent of cases, the religion which an individual professes and to which he or she adheres depends on the accidents of birth.

Of course, we cannot even doubt this, let alone to deny it, but, the ensuing question to be ask is what conclusion can we drawn from this line of reasoning? Hick's policy is clearly want to relativize belief to a context. Yet this policy cannot provide us the answer for the question of whether the belief is true. Instead, it will lead us the conclusion that eventually have to deny any idea of truth.

Therefore, we cannot expect from this line of reasoning that we can have any notion of the 'Real' This is because the 'Real' will out of our grasp if we see religious perspective as culturally conditioned. A 'Real' will turn out to be useless or even worse as no 'Real' at all if it is divulged in many conflicting ways.

Thus, as we live in the society of so many religions as today the important question that we cannot afford to avoid is how can we understand the fact of different religion? As long as we do not give up the concept of truth, of course we cannot, we cannot deny the fact that the disagreement has to be faced to. Assuming the conflict in religions as a little account is not a proper move to be taken. This is because it will lead us to the position of regarding what is believed in the realm of religion does not matter at all. And this will then lead us to the conclusion that it does not matter if we reject all religions. If the conflicting between religions could someday be reconciled we still have to face the disagreement with the atheist. Pluralists like John Hick may be can achieve the agreement with one line of reasoning but he still cannot run away from many people who disagree with him.

The real problem we have to face here is not the matter of disagreement but to settle down the problem of how we can pursue to constitute truth. Yet, at the same time we also have to find out the proper way to treat those who are still renounce our policy? Our novel intentions of seeking mutual respect and tolerance should certainly not predominance us in our endeavor to discover what is true.

Because it cannot provide a 'Real' as an effect from its relativizing of religious beliefs policy, a pluralist can hardly be a realist. This is because according to pluralist, religious beliefs are conditioned by culture then there is no God out of context. In other words, we cannot find any notion of God that can really exist outside the context.

But a realist's view that stress the differentiation between beliefs and what they are about has its important role to tell us that others may be mistaken or have an incomplete knowledge. Yet it does not stop here because it also tell us about our own dilemma too. Certainly, our great concern about truth will not lead us to put aside some of our significant beliefs in order to adapt others, and similarly, we also have to seriously think about others, respect for truth as they see it.

Hick's view can scarcely be right if he adapts the policy that because we cannot all be right then none of us can. It is possible for religion to learn each

other without being compromised. We cannot say that others cannot know about God just because of the fact that God has revealed Himself in special way to one set of people. And it will be improper also to conclude that no one cannot reach a knowledge of God because of the cultural superimpose on all revelations and thus, becomes adulterated.

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