Religious Plurality: Myth or Reality?

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ABSTRACT

*The truth-claim is natural to religion. In the modern era, however, many attempts have been made to relativize the uniqueness and exclusiveness of religious truth-claim reducing it into merely religious experience, which is very relative in nature, **under the guise of religious pluralism, i. e., that all religions are but different soteriological "spaces" within which, or "ways" through which, men can find salvation/liberation/enlightenment/ fulfilment.** In short, all religions share the truth. But evidently, this theory has grown up ultimately becoming a very absolute truth-claim, and establishing its own uniqueness and exclusiveness in addition to the existing truth-claims. Hence, it becomes part of the problem more than solution.*

However, Islam offers its concept of "Hanifism" as an alternative solution to the problem. It is the only system that allows "the others" to be fully "others" without any sort of reduction, distortion and relativization. Consequently, on the practical level Islam acknowledges, and therefore offers to the followers of all religions, "the plurality of laws" to govern their lives, each under the aegis of its own principles and laws. And this is, in fact, the best gift of Islam to humankind, which no system in the world, even the modern democracy, dares do so.

A. Background of the Discourse

Along with the ongoing process of socio-political liberalization that has considerably marked the birth of the new world order in the modern era, followed by the economic liberalization or globalization (neo-imperialism), religion or the religious domain, in turn, has been forced to subject itself to liberalization, or to be liberalized.

Religion, the jurisdiction of which has, since the era of Reformation in 15th century been terribly reduced, marginalized and domesticated in such a way that it is merely allowed to operate within the most private aspect of human life, in fact is still considered insufficiently conducive (or even disturbing) to the fulfillment of a democratic and harmonious new world order that promotes human values and rights such as tolerance, freedom, egalitarianism and pluralism. It is as if all religions, without exception, are the enemy of democracy, humanity and the human rights, so that they have to deconstruct themselves voluntarily (or to be deconstructed by force) in order, to use the liberalists' term, to be independent and free from the domination of texts and tradition irrelevant to the *zeitgeist* or out of date.

If the process of liberalizing socio-politics in the West evidently resulted in "political pluralism", then liberalization of religion, which is actually meant to facilitate it, should come up with the creation of a social order where all religions would stand on the same footing, so that "all are equally true, authentic and valid, but, at the same time, relative." In other words, the liberalization of religion should bring about "religious pluralism."

Since the concept of "liberalism" is initially a socio-political ideology, as such, the discourse of pluralism –including religious pluralism- which is the direct result of it, has inevitably inherited, and is to be found more imbued also with, political nuance and flavour. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the very concept of religious pluralism had emerged within the framework of "political pluralism",[1] which is itself the product of "political liberalism". Therefore, it is obvious that the notion of liberalism is actually nothing other than a political response towards the social condition of the Christian society in Europe which was characterized by a plurality of sects and denominations. However such a pluralistic condition has exclusively remained the social phenomenon of Christian Europe for a long time, and only after the 20th century did it spread to other communities in the world.

Although the winds of pluralism had then started breathing and giving shape to European thought in particular and Western in general, yet it was, however, not strongly established in the culture. Because, as a matter of fact, some Christian denominations still received discriminative and prejudicial treatment from the church. The Mormon, for instance, because charged as a heterodox movement, was not recognized by the church until the end of 19th century, and only received recognition after a strong protest by a president of the United States, Grover Cleveland (1837-1908). Similarly, the doctrine *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church, there is no salvation) has also been upheld strongly by the Catholic church, until the Vatican Council II of the early sixties of the 20th century, wherein the doctrine of salvation was admitted as universal and common to all, even to those who are the followers of religions other than Christianity.[2]

Thus it is safe to say that according to Prof. Legenhausen, the idea of religious pluralism is actually the outcome of an attempt to provide a theoretical foundation within Christian theology for tolerance of non-Christian religions. In this sense, the idea of religious pluralism could be seen as an element of a reform movement of religious thought or a liberalization of religion that has been introduced by Christian church in the 19th century –a movement which was, later on, known as "Liberal Protestantism" led by Friedrich Schleiermacher.[3]

By the turn of the 20th century, the idea of religious pluralism has developed greater strength within the discourse of Western philosophy and theology. A prominent figure pioneering this idea was Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), a liberal Christian theologian. In his article entitled 'The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions',[4] presented in his lecture at Oxford University right before his death in 1923, Troeltsch introduced the idea of religious pluralism argumentatively saying in effect that all religions, including Christianity, always contain *an* element of truth, and none has *the* absolute truth,[5] and the concept of God in this world is plural and not singular.[6]

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[1] In the sociological terminology, pluralism is more akin to political issue than religious one. See: Francis W. Coker, 'Pluralism', in Edwin R. A. Seligman, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, [1933] 14th printing, 1969), Vol. XII, pp. 170-4; also Henry S. Kariel, 'Pluralism', in David L. Sills, (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (New York: The Macmillan Company & The Free Press, [1968] reprinted 1972), Vol. 12, pp. 164-9.

[2] Texts of the doctrine, see: 'Vatican II: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions', in John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (eds.), *Christianity and Other Religions* (Glasgow: Fount Paperbacks, 1980), pp. 80-6.

[3] Muhammad Legenhausen points out this remarks in his, 'Islam and Religious Pluralism,' in *Al-Tawhid*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Fall 1997, p. 116.

[4] The article 'The Place of Christianity among the World Religions' was published along with another articles in a book edited by John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, *Christianity and Other Religions*. See John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, (eds.), *Christianity and Other Religions* (Glasgow: Fount Paperbacks, 1980), pp. 11-31.

[5] Ibid. p. 18.

[6] Ibid. p. 31.

William E. Hocking, following the steps taken by Troeltsch, confidently predicted, in his books *Re-thinking Mission* in 1932, and *Living Religion and A World Faith*, the emergence of a new pattern of faith or a universal religion which would be relevant to the concept of global government.[7] Later, a renowned British historian, Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), also came forward, in his work *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (1956) and *Christianity and World Religions* (1957), with an idea similar to that of Troeltsch.[8]

The works mentioned above constitute the first phase of the discourse of religious pluralism that could arguably be considered as the level of fermentation and shaping of the discourse. Later on, this notion receives special attention and becomes stronger and clearer in the person of Canadian theologian and historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. In his work *Towards a World Theology* (1981), he tried to convince all that there is a desperate need to breed a concept of universal or global theology that can best serve as a common ground for religions of the world to co-exist with each other in society peacefully and harmoniously. This work apparently represents the apex of his long academic career and scholarship, especially his works *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962) and *Questions of Religious Truth* (1967).

During the last two decades of the 20th century, the idea of religious pluralism has reached its maturity and, in turn, become the very discourse of essential thought in modern theology and philosophy of religion. The socio-political phenomenon at the end of the 20th century has also evinced a new reality of inter-religious life that serves remarkably as a verbal expression of this religious pluralism. On the theoretical level, then, modern theologians and philosophers of religion, with more sophisticated concept more acceptable to the people of diverse religions, developed religious pluralism further. John Hick painstakingly reconstructed the theoretical basis of religious pluralism in such a way that it became an established theory and very popular to such an extent that it has become identical with his name.[9] His book, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, which was originally a series of his lectures, namely Gifford Lecture in 1986-1987, and was in fact the summary of thoughts already exposed in his previous works, is a masterpiece dedicated mainly to deal with the issue in question.

Interestingly enough, while we are trying to trace and explore the development of the idea of religious pluralism, this discourse reveals itself as a purely Protestant phenomenon, in the sense that it occurred within the Protestant reform movement in particular, although the doctrine *extra Christos nulla salus* (no salvation outside the Christianity) in fact has remained predominant in the thought of the Protestants till the end of the 19th century. As for the Catholicism, she is generally inclined to refuse the idea of religious pluralism, defending firmly the doctrine *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the church) till the Vatican Council II.

Meanwhile, in Islamic discursive thought, the notion of religious pluralism is considered something new and has no sound ideological stronghold, or even theological roots. However, this notion has penetrated into some modern Muslims' consciousness as a result of the onslaught of hegemonization and globalization of Western culture. This is especially true if we consider the fact that the discourse of religious pluralism just started to gain currency within Islamic thought after the second World War, when the opportunity for

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[7] See: Geoffrey Parrinder, *Comparative Religion* (London: Sheldon Press, [1962] 2nd ed. 1977), p. 50.

[8] See: Arnold Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (1956) and his *Christianity and World Religions* (1957)

[9] It is worth noting that, amongst the modern scholars, John Hick is probably the only one who pays due attention toward the problem of religious diversity, theorizing religious pluralism, in such profoundness. He has elaborated his hypothesis of religious pluralism in, if not all, almost all of his scholarly works.

young Muslim generations to receive education in Western universities was opened widely (so that they could experience direct interaction with the Western culture).

On the other hand, the spread of this idea among the Muslim circles has also been partly made possible by the works of Western Muslim mystics such as Rene Guenon (Abdul Wahid Yahya) and Frithjof Schuon (Isa Nuruddin Ahmad). Their works are very eloquent and thoughtful, providing the inspirational basis for the development of the discourse of religious pluralism within the modern Islamic trends. However, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a Shi'ite Muslim intellectual, is perhaps the person most responsible for the popularization of the notion of religious pluralism from the perspective of "traditional Islam" –an achievement that has brought him into an international caliber at the level of great scholars such as Ninian Smart, John Hick, and Annemarie Schimmel.

Nasr tried to develop his theory of religious pluralism based on, and in form of, perennial wisdom (*sophia perennis, al-ḥikmah al-khālidah*), that is, a modern philosophical trend which claims to revive the "metaphysical unity" hidden in the religious teachings and traditions known to humans since Adam (AS) until the present time. Thus, according to Nasr, to embrace, or to believe in, one religion practicing all of its teachings devoutly, is considered to embrace all religions. Because all religions, as Nasr contends, stem from the same Truth which is eternal.[10] Further, differences among religions and traditions, according to Nasr, are merely on the level of symbol, or exoteric, while their essence, or the esoteric, always remains the same. Hence, it can be seen clearly that Nasr's approach to the problem is not much different from the other existing approaches in general. A serious question is as to whether Nasr's thesis really has a solid and valid justification within the Islamic thought and tradition though this seems to be his intentions.

Thus, up to a certain extent, it could be concluded, that the emergence of a modern discourse of religious pluralism along with its various trends, demonstratively reflects of how dominant and hegemonic the Western culture and civilization are –a fact that in order to guarantee its existence and survival, necessitates such a "religious legitimacy", or what is called by Peter L. Berger as "sacred canopy",[11] relevant to the logic of modern humanity which claims to promote tolerance, equality and freedom, or liberalism. This obsession of the West is manifest in a series of serious efforts to spread this ideology, using political and economic pressures, and even by military force, against countries which are reluctant to adopt pluralism, under the new jargon of a "New World Order" launched by the United States in the nineties of the last century.

B. Religion and the Truth Claim

In the final analysis, any religion, without exception (dead or living, ancient or modern, theistic or non-theistic), came into existence imbued with its own "truth claim", explicitly or implicitly. Whether these numerous truth-claims are valid or not, rational or irrational, that is another issue. In other words, no religion fails to make a truth-claim. Certainly, there are significant differences among the religions as regards their diverse truth-claims. But at least, there are three main positions, namely exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.[12]

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[10] Seyyed Hossen Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1994), p. 16.

[11] As for the detail of the theory, see: Peter L. Berger, *Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

[12] Here, I follow the pattern of classification developed by John Hick in his *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1985), pp. 31-37. Although he focuses in his analysis only on the Christian tradition to which he belongs, he tries at the same time to develop (or simplify) this pattern with other relevant data from different religions so that it will possibly apply to other religious traditions, especially the Semitic religions.

1. Exclusivism

It is a claim that absolute truth is confined only to one particular religion exclusively. This claim does not compromise with any other alternative. It sees the truth in black and white.

The absolute truth-claim is, by and large, found in every religion. This obviously portrayed in Semitic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, each of which claims itself as the only Truth in exclusion to others. This exclusive claim of truth is usually justified with a juridical concept of salvation, where each of them claims itself as the only soteriological "space" within which, or "way" through which, man/woman can find salvation/liberation/enlightenment –a concept that has undoubtedly injected some more credentials to the idea of absolute truth-claims. Judaism, with its doctrine of "the chosen people", acknowledges truth, piety and salvation based only on a very narrow ethnic perspective, that is of the Jews; Catholicism with its doctrine of *"extra ecclesiam nulla salus"*, and Protestantism with its doctrine of "outside Christianity, no salvation" determine the status of the piety and salvation of a man based only on the firm belief in a sacrifice performed by Jesus on the cross in order to redeem original sin; while Islam with the statement of Allah in the Holy Qur'an: *"inna al-dīna ʿinda Allāhi al-islām"*[13] considers salvation only to be attained through total submission to Allah (*wa man yabtaghi ghaira al-islāmi dīnan fa lan yuqbala minhu wa huwa fī al-ākhirati min al-khāsirīn*).[14]

2. Inclusivism

Actually, inclusivism in its own right is an absolute claim of religious truth and uniqueness which is a little bit wider and more open. On the one hand, inclusivism still believes firmly that only one religion is absolutely *the* truth, but on the other, it tries to accommodate the juridical concept of salvation and transformation that would include all followers of other religions, not because their religions are right, but because of "blessings" or "charity" of the absolute truth it enjoys. This concept found its full-fledge and articulate expression in the theological thoughts developed by theologians such as Karl Rahner with his theory of "anonymous Christian",[15] followed by Gavin D'Costa,[16] and Raimundo Panikkar with his concept of "unknown Christ of Hinduism".[17]

So far as we can trace, this inclusive theology is found only within the Christian environment in its later phase, as a response, firstly, to modern pluralist theology that spread in about the second half of the twentieth century, and secondly, to the exclusive claim which, according to them, is irrelevant and obsolete. In other words, inclusivism attempts to strike a balance and to take a middle course and attitude between exclusivism and pluralism. It sought to maintain and defend the main Christian doctrine of *Atonement*, while at the same time seeking a new and fresh interpretation consonant with the values of modern humanity. That is, as long as the *atonement* is initially performed to redeem original sins of the children of Adam, then the status of all mankind is open to the mercy of God, eventhough they might have never heard about Jesus and why he died on the cross, and eventhough they are

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[13] Āli ʿImrān: 19.

[14] Āli ʿImrān: 85.

[15] See: John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 33; also Maurice Wiles, 'The Meaning of Christ,' in Arvind Sharma, (ed.), *God, Truth and Reality: Essays in Honour of John Hick* (Basingstoke, London: The Macmillan Press, 1993), p. 229.

[16] Gavin D'Costa, 'John Hick and Religious Pluralism: Yet Another Revolution,' in Harold Hewitt, Jr. (Ed.), *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1991), p. 15; also his article: 'Karl Rahner's Anonymous Christian - A Reappraisal,' in *Modern Theology*, 1:2 (January 1985), p. 139.

[17] Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, [1964] rev. ed. 1981).

followers of other religions. This theology was, then, adopted formally by the Vatican as declared in the Vatican Council II in 1962-1965.

However the truth-claim of this model has left a serious logical problem (logical inconsistency). The question that arises is that if the salvation is made possible without any connection with a Church, the Gospels and any other Christian doctrines, then how is one to justify the strong labeling of others? Moreover, why are the missionary activities still being carried out unceasingly, using different methods and ways, to Christianize the whole world? Once it is declared that salvation is not dependent on Christian faith, the proselytization activities should be stopped without any delay; otherwise inclusivism is merely an empty slogan to camouflage certain agendas.

3. Pluralism

This discourse, as clearly seen from the foregoing elaboration, came into existence and grew up within a certain socio-political configuration and setting, that is, the Western secular humanism which gave birth to the liberal democratic system, one of whose constituencies is religious pluralism (identified by some sociologist as "civil religion").[18] Thus, it is much to be expected that any country or government that follows the model of such a socio-political system, sooner or later, will inevitably induce the birth of religious pluralism or civil religion, though it may be varied and different from one to another in form (but not in essence) depending on the local colour and content.[19]

As is idealized by its advocates, the claim of pluralism has been deliberately presented in such a way that it apparently looks humanist, friendly, polite, open, tolerant, smart, democratic, enlightening and promising. This could be observed easily from the definition of the hypothesis given by John Hick, the figure most responsible and an icon in religious pluralism, in his *Problems of Religious Pluralism*:

> Stated philosophically...pluralism is the view that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness is manifestly taking place...and taking place, so far as human observation can tell, to much the same extent.[20]

In other words, this pluralistic truth-claim asserts eagerly that all religions, theistic or non-theistic, can be considered as soteriological "spaces" within which, or "ways" through

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[18] Robert N. Bellah, a modern American sociologist, has identified and theorised this model of modern religious experience in an article entitled 'Civil Religion in America', based on his research on the experience of modern American life. This article was published in *Daedalus*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (Winter 1967), then republished, along with his other articles, in Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (Berkeley, Los Ageles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1970), pp. 168-189.

[19] Civil religion which arose and grew up in the United States of Amerika is just an example. This kind of religion can arise in any part of the globe which follows the U.S. and believes in democratic system, such as Indonesia. Therefore, civil religion can exist in various forms, as theorized by Bellah dan Hammond [Robert N. Bellah, and Phillip E. Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion* (San Fransisco: Harper&Row,1980)], but their essence will remain the same, especially in apotheosizing national political life and considering it as transcendent.

[20] John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 36. The same definition or so can be found also in his other works, such as follows:

> ...the term refers to a particular theory of the relation between these traditions, with their different and competing claims. This is the theory that the great world religions constitute variant conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the one ultimate, mysterious divine reality. [Hick, John, 'Religious Pluralism,' in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), Vol. 12, p. 331].

which, human being can find salvation/liberation/enlightenment.[21] All religions are valid, because they, in fact, constitute the different authentic responses to the same transcendent "Real",[22] and, thus, all of them are authentic manifestations of the "Real".[23]

However, in the final analysis, it is found that this pluralistic claim has never been better, and possibly worse, than the previous truth-claims. Rather, it would be more accurate to define it as an absolute "relative truth-claim". It is absolute in the sense that this claim is not only eager to relativize all of the existing absolute religious truth-claims –so that all religions are relatively the same, but also in reality it struggles trickily to transcend, or to be superior over, them all –so that it is the only absolute one.[24] This is because, *first*, theoretically and epistemologically, relativizing these truth-claims means implicitly (though rarely seen by the pluralists) that the pluralistic claim is denying, or at least is degrading, the real truth of these claims. *Second*, practically and axiologically, this pluralistic claim is acting just like a referee in the football yard where he is supposed to control and direct all players, keeping the game always in order, but at the same time, indulging himself to become one of the competitors.

Therefore, this pluralistic-claim is in fact very problematic and dangerous, threatening the existence of religions and human rights, especially religious freedom. And this, eventually, leads the hypothesis of religious pluralism to an extremely difficult dilemma. Namely, whether it is really a friendly and peaceful solution to the problem of conflicting truth-claims among religions, as is usually claimed, or instead, has become a new problem within the phenomenon of religious diversity?

In short, the pivotal problem in which all these implications take root is that the term "religious pluralism" has so far been understood and designed within the Western secular and liberal context, which sternly rejects anything metaphysical. Accordingly, "religion" is considered as a "human response" purely and simply, or what is commonly known nowadays within the disciplines of comparative religion (*religionswissenschaft*), philosophy of religion, sociology, anthropology and psychology as "religious experience", denying *in toto* the probability of its God-origin. Moreover, this fact is also what has been observed by Proudfoot, in his *Religious Experience*, when he said:

> The turn to religious experience was motivated in large measure by an interest in freeing religious doctrine and practice from dependence on *metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions* and grounding it in human experience.[25]

Thus, it is not surprising if this kind of understanding, on the one hand, has led inevitably to a conclusion as to the equalization of all religions completely –a conclusion that actually has put the advocates of this idea, especially those who are Christians, into a dilemmatic position as to answer whether or not Christianity is in fact equal to primitive and pagan cannibalistic religions.

On the other hand, it has reduced drastically the concept of religion as being merely operative in the spiritual arena of humankind, which is very narrow and private –only involving the relationship of human being with his/her God or the Ultimate. However, a

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[21] John Hick, *Problems*, pp. 36-37.
[22] John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, pp. 10, 77-79.
[23] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, [1989] reprinted 1991), p. 247.
[24] The statement of Bellah and Hammond in *Varieties of Civil Religion* affirmed further this conclusion. They stated further: "American civil religion with its tradition of openness, tolerance, and ethical commitment might make a contribution to a world civil religion that would transcend and include it." [Bellah, Robert N., and Hammond, Phillip E., *op. cit.*, p. xiv].
[25] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1985), p. xiii. (Emphasis added)

crucial question here is whether or not this individual relationship with the sacred and metaphysical being would or could influence and determine human behavior either individually or collectively. Certainly there will be no answer except in affirmation. For modern studies done by experts of various disciplines have shown convincingly their inclination towards the affirmation of this trend. A modern philosopher George Santayana, for example, states in his book *Reason in Religion*, "True religion is entirely human and political, as was that of the ancient Hebrews, Romans, and Greeks."[26] Prof. Joachim Wach, a contemporary scholar of comparative religion, also concludes that human beings at any time and any where always need to express religious experience in three ways: first, conceptually or intellectually; second, practically; and third, sociologically. Furthermore, this phenomenon according to him is universal.[27] Likewise Prof. Ninian Smart, an expert of comparative religion,[28] and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz,[29] maintain a comprehensiveness of religion that encompasses all dimensions of human life.

As such, not only do these facts confirm the comprehensiveness, inclusiveness and totality of religion, but also enlarge its jurisdiction of meaning as to include, not only the *institutionalized religions*, but also all of the worldviews or *weltanschauung* known to human being, such as modern secular ideologies. This, in turn, suggests automatically or even axiomatically that the concept of dichotomization of reality: state-religion, sacred-profane, private-public, etc. is no longer proper and accurate, or it is indeed even misleading.[30]

Meanwhile, the meaning of the term "pluralism" in the West nowadays has actually undergone a significant development, or a fundamental change, so that it becomes equal exactly to the meaning of democracy, namely the affirmation of freedom, equality, tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Nevertheless, this modern Western concept that theoretically looks so elegant and tolerant, on the practical level tends to show the opposite behavior, i.e., intolerance, oppressiveness and a denial of the very identity and the rights of others, especially the minorities. Because in reality, as one prominent scholar has correctly said, "The West has forced others to follow its dictates culturally and intellectually … and to give up their own history, culture, religious and intellectual reference.[31] In other words, the West is unwilling to let others to be really others.

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[26] George Santayana, *Reason in Religion* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 188.

[27] Joachim Wach, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

[28] See the detail: Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996). This model of approaching religion through its phenomenal dimensions has become typical to Smart's study of religions. This is clearly manifest in his other works such as: *The Religiuos Experience of Mankind* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1996); and his co-edited book with Richard D. Hecht, *Sacred Texts of the World: A Universal Anthology* (Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1982).

[29] See Geertz's definition of religion in which he states that:

> . . . (A) religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. [Clifford Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System,' in William A. Lessa, and Evon Z. Vogt (eds.), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach* (New York, Philadelphia, San Fransisco, London: Harper & Row Publishers, Fourth Edition 1979), pp. 79-80; and in David Hicks (ed.), *Ritual & Belief: Readings in the Anthropology of Religion* (Boston, Bangkok, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Toronto: McGraw-Hill College, 1999), p. 13.]

[30] Today, there is a growing concern within the academic circle to criticize the accuracy of the concept, concluding that this "dichotomization" is untenable in the face of objective proofs and evidences from the contemporary socio-political development. [see, for instance: Algernon Sidney Crapsey, *Religion and Politics* (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1905), *passim*; and Clarke E. Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), *passim*.

[31] Dr. Muḥammad 'Imārah, 'Al-Taʿaddudiyyah … al-Ru'yah al-'Islāmiyyah wa al-Taḥaddiyyāt al-Gharbiyyah,' in *Majallah al-Jāmi'ah al-'Islāmiyyah*, London, Vol. 2, Th. I (Shawwāl-Dzul-Ḥijjah 1414H.), p. 67.

Having seen and realized such a ridiculous fact, some Western intellectuals recently started thinking of the necessity to revise the concept of "pluralism" so that it should not be subject of a monolithic interpretation only (i.e., the western). John O. Voll, for instance, stated while reviewing the book *Pluralism and Religions: The Theological and Political Dimensions*, that there is a growing awareness that the concept of pluralism, which is the focus of the contemporary discourses, is subject to various understandings.[32] And John D'Arcy May, the editor of that book, opened his essay with the issues around the necessity of reckoning "plurality of ways" in reading and understanding this concept. He said, further:

> It is beginning to dawn on Western theologians that there may be alternative models of pluralism with roots in other cultures and religions. Must we reckon not only with varieties of religions but also with those of pluralism? ...Must we now get used to asking 'whose pluralism' as well as 'which religion?'[33]

Such questions would inevitably appear on the surface of one's awareness just by looking at the very meaning of the term "pluralism". Therefore one writer suggested a definition that a society is not pluralistic enough because it simply consists of diverse units and groups, but:

> Pluralistic society is one in which: (i) there co-exist more than one religion, philosophy or weltanschauung, which are in a relationship of conflict (in Galtung's sense), (ii) there is some degree of recognition by all the parties concerned that a fundamental incompatibility between them exists, and (iii) there is nevertheless some degree of awareness that this co-existence of incompatibilities is of positive value, both to the community as a whole, and to each of the included organisms in themselves.[34]

These thoughtful reflections have confirmed further that the concept of "religious pluralism" developed by the pluralist (that is, that all religions are same and equal), is untenable, and impossible to be implemented in the real life of a society perfectly without violating the human rights of the groups living under its system.

So, based on the above critical analysis, it can be concluded safely that the pluralistic truth-claim is not only logically inconsistent, but also reductionistic, and practically inapplicable. And, accordingly, if it is to be implemented forcefully, it will bring about tremendous humanistic calamity.

C. Islam and the Religious Truth-Claims

The problem of Islam's relation with other religions along with their truth-claims theologically has been settled already by the Almighty Allah Himself since the very beginning through His final revelation, al-Qur'an, and not by the Muslims through their "hermeneutic interpretation", let alone based on their "images" as accused cynically, for instance, by Jacques Waardenburg, in his essay 'World Religions as Seen in the Light of Islam.'[35] However, to the non-Muslims (as well as some Muslims who followed their path uncritically), perhaps this statement leaves some doubts and ambiguities that often tempt them to question its validity or even to reject it altogether. Nevertheless, one thing should be addressed seriously, in this regard, that Islam has never presented its basic principles

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[32] See the review of John O. Voll in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 10, No. 2, July 1999, pp. 237-9.

[33] John D'Arcy May (ed.), *Pluralism and Religions: The Theological and Political Dimensions* (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 1.

[34] A. Nickles, 'A Religion in A Pluralist Society,' in J. S. Pobee (ed.), *Religion in A Pluralistic Society* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), p. 157.

[35] Jacques Waardenburg, 'World Religions as Seen in the Light of Islam,' in Alford T. Welch and Pierre Cachia, (eds.), *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979), p. 268.

dogmatically as commonly found in other religions. Instead, Islam presents them rationally and critically. Or to use Al-Fārūqī's words:

> It comes to us armed with logical and coherent arguments; and expects our acquiescence on rational, and hence necessary, grounds. It is not legitimate for us to disagree on the relativist basis of personal taste, or that of subjective experience.[36]

Having conceived the problem of inter-religious relations in such a way, i.e. that it theologically has been final and settled conclusively, it is no wonder, then, that the intense and elaborate discussions amongst the classical Muslim scholars (*ulamā'*) and jurists pertaining to this issue are commonly to be found, in large measure, in the *fiqhi* discourses, and not in *kalām*. Because, in the writer's humble analysis, this problem in the views of these *'ulamā'* is actually the problem of sociological and practical co-existence between human beings, as individuals and collectives, who embrace different religions, faiths and traditions; that is, the problem pertains to how to govern the individuals and communities living in a society, what their rights and duties are, etc., so as to keep and maintain peace and general order. Thus, this problem is much more applicative, administrative and practical than theological (where the revelation has already settled it once and for all, and has left it to the discretion of individual freedom to choose in accordance with one's conscience, "*lā ikrāha fī al-dīn, qad tabayyana al-rushdu min al-ghayyi*").[37]

So, methodologically there is ample and fundamental discrepancy between Islam and the theories of religious pluralism in their respective approach towards the issue and phenomenon of religious plurality. Islam considers it as an ontological reality which is genuine and undeniable, whereas the pluralistic theories tend to consider it as the variety that appears only at the level of external manifestation which is superficial, and hence it is not real or not genuine. And this methodological difference, in turn, affects inevitably the resulting polarity in determining a solution. Islam offers "practical and sociological solution", therefore it is more "*fiqhiyyah*" in nature, rather than "*kalāmiyyah*"; while the pluralistic theories come up with "theological, epistemological solution".

As stated above, Islam sees religious diversity and plurality as an ontological reality (*ḥaqīqah wujūdiyyah/kawniyyah*) and *sunnatullāh*, and as such it is genuine (including the absolute and exclusive truth-claim without which the identity of religion would become absurd, obscure, or even lost). In another words, Islam treats other religions as the way they are and lets them be themselves, without any sort of reduction or manipulation. A Religious truth-claim, whatever it is, must be duly respected, and not to be simplified or relativized, let alone negated or ignored. Because, in the Islamic point of view, faith in particular and religion in general are a matter of conviction (*iqtinā'*) –thus, there should be no compulsion in religion, "*lā ikrāha fī al-dīn*"; and sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*) –thus, in al-Qur'an the *sūrah* that prescribes the essence of Islamic faith is named "*Al-Ikhlāṣ*". However, it should be added immediately here, that that conviction and sincerity meant above is not that of an emotional and uncritical stemming out of sheer desire, rather it is meant to be rational and critical, for Islam is a rational religion *par excellence*. In this matter of *iqnā'* (convincing) and *iqtinā'* (to be convinced), Islam stringently observes a principle, to use Al-Fārūqī's term, "let the best argument win".[38]

This principle of rationality is evidently demonstrated in a number of the Qur'anic verses by which al-Qur'an responds, or offers a solution, to the truth-claims made by the Jews and Christians. Reflect, for instance, on the verses of Al-Baqarah:111-112, where Allah

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[36] Ismā'īl R. Al-Fārūqī, 'Meta-Religion:Towards A Critical World Theology', in *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* (Vol. 3, No. 1, September 1986), p. 40.
[37] Al-Baqarah: 256.
[38] See: Ismā'īl R. Al-Fārūqī, 'Islam and Other Faiths: The World's Need for Humane Universalism,' in Altaf Gauhar (ed.), *The Challenge of Islam* (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1978), p. 100.

the Almighty commands the prophet Muhammad (SAAS) to respond to them, firstly by asking them to produce "the proof" of their truth-claims (*qul hātū burhānakum in kuntum ṣādiqīn*), lest they are just illusions (*amānī*); and secondly by making a counter-claim which is relatively more neutral (*balā man aslama wajhahū lillāh*), not based on a certain religion (in this case, Jews and Christian). In another Qur'anic verse, Al-Baqarah:135, the Messenger of Allah (SAAS) is also commanded to respond to their claims by persuading them to return to the neutral religiosity, namely "the *Ḥanīfiyyah*" (the *millah* or tradition of Abraham who is commonly recognized as the father of the three Semitic religions), which in another Qur'anic verse is termed as *kalimah sawā'*.[39] Still, In another Qur'anic verse, Al-Mā'idah:18, likewise Prophet Muhammad is commanded to respond to their claims by inviting them to use their reason.

In the same manner, Islam also emphasizes the principle of rationality in dealing with the mutual truth-claims of the Jews, Christians and followers of other religions, between each other, that their claims are actually not founded on the sound knowledge.[40]

However, it should be stated here immediately that the above Qur'anic account has by no means endeavoured to reduce the truth-claims of these religions as unserious and unreal. This is arguably so, because when they still persist with their own faith, Islam acknowledges their existence with due respect, and lets them live their life in accordance with their absolute and exclusive faith.[41] Actually, here is tolerance in its real sense, that is, to respect and guaranty other people's or group's right to be different.

Moreover, theoretically speaking the response of Islam towards religious truth-claims could be explained in two levels:

First, as regards to Judaism and Christianity, Islam gives special status to both. Their followers are categorically called "*Ahl al-Kitāb*" (People of the Book). Belief in their prophets and their scriptures is an integral part of the pillars of *īmān* in Islam, where to deny any one of them, or to discriminate between them, would certainly exclude someone from the status as Muslim. Allah the Almighty has described the Prophet (SAAS) and his followers in the Qur'an as believing in whatever has been reveled from Allah; in Allah, His angels, His books, and His messengers; without discriminating between the messengers of Allah.[42]

Based on the foundation of this faith, Islam proudly identified itself as one family with them, that is, "Abrahamic family", as well as one tradition with them, that is, "Semitic Tradition" which is also called "*Ḥanīfiyyah*" or "*Ḥanīfism*". It is over here, especially in the concept of "*Ḥanīfism*", that the inclusivism of Islam is clearly manifest. However, Al-Faruqi reminds all, that this Islamic inclusivism should not be equalized with Karl Rahner's concept of "anonymous Christian". "*Ḥanīf*" is a Qur'anic category, and not invented by Muslim theologian who feel embarrassed and uneasy with the claim of exclusive divine mercy. Rather, this concept had in fact already been in existence as early as the Qur'an was first revealed.[43] Apart from this, the respect accorded by Islam to both of these religions, is not because of cultural and socio-political reason or good will, but because of the genuine and deep faith in that their prophets were commissioned by the same God with revelation and books that bear the same message and religion, i.e., Islam.[44] Then, if they still persist in claiming otherwise, refusing self-identification with this family and tradition, denying the

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[39] Āli 'Imrān: 63.
[40] This is clearly recorded in the Qur'an, Al-Baqarah:113.
[41] See: Āli 'Imrān:20 and 63.
[42] See: Al-Baqarah: 285.
[43] See: Ismā'īl R. Al-Fārūqī, 'Meta-Religion: Towards A Critical World Theology', p. 43.
[44] See the Qurān: Yūnus:71-72; Al-Baqarah:131-132; Āli 'Imrān:67; Yūsuf:101; Yūnus:84; Al-A'rāf:126; Al-Naml:44; Al-Mā'idah:44; Āli 'Imrān:52; Al-Mā'idah:111.

prophet Muhammad (SAAS) and his followers, and preserving the claim of exclusive monopoly of absolute truth, chosenness and only the former prophets, the Qur'an expounds that:

(i) *"mā kāna ibrāhīmu yahūdiyyan wa lā naṣrāniyyan wa lākin kāna ḥanīfan musliman wa mā kāna min al-mushrikīn"*[45] (Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was a true Muslim *ḥanīf* and he was not of *al-mushrikīn*); and *"inna awla al-nāsi bi ibrāhīma lal-ladhīna ittabaʿūhu wa hādha al-nabiyyu wa al-ladhīna āmanū wa Allāhu waliyyu al-mu'minīn"*[46] (Verily, among mankind who have the best claim to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet and those *mu'minūn*. And Allah is the *Walī* of the believers);

(ii) they have to return to *kalimah sawā'*, which is itself *Ḥanīfism*; that is, *"an lā naʿbuda illā Allāh wa lā nusyrika bihī syai'ā wa lā yattakhidha baʿḍunā baʿḍan arbāban min dūni Allāh."*[47] (that we worship none but Allah, and that we associate no partners with Him, and that none of us shall take others as lords besides Allah).

Second, as regards other religions, actually Islam gives them nearly the same status as that of the two religions mentioned above, though it is not spelt out in a straight-forward manner, but by implication. This is obvious in the Qur'anic notion of universality of "the prophethood phenomenon".[48] As such, it could be inferred safely that the whole humankind is truly one (*ummatun wāḥidah*);[49] specifically in the sense that:

(i) Every human being, individual or group, has been a follower of one of the prophets or messengers of Allah, who brought the same message and religion, which is Islam, to one degree or another.

(ii) Every human being, individual or group, has been the object of "heavenly communication", or recipient of revelation sent down by the same God.

(iii) Every human being is born in the state of *fiṭrah* (naturis), as clearly stated in the Prophetic traditions.[50] And according to the Qur'anic point of view, *fiṭrah* is the "primordial religion" of all mankind, as they have signed the "primordial covenant" with God when they all were in the archetypal world, namely that they bore witness that only Allah the Almighty is the Lord.[51] And this is the nucleus and essence of *Ḥanīfism* that Islam has proudly identified itself with.[52] Thus, the concept of *Ḥanīfism* is not only potentially prepared to include Judaism and Christianity, but also all religions of whole mankind as clearly stated in *hadīth qudsī* (the tradition narrated by the Prophet (SAAS) from Allah the Almighty): *"Innī khalaqtu ʿibādī kullahum ḥunafā'"*[53] (Verily I created My servants all as *ḥanīf*s).

Accordingly, it is quite obvious that the status accorded by Islam for other religions is "nearly same" with that given to Judaism and Christianity, the difference being only in terms of categorization and specification. Because both of these religions geographically and

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[45] Āli ʿImrān: 67.
[46] Āli ʿImrān: 68.
[47] Āli ʿImrān: 64.
[48] See the Qurān: Fāṭir:24; Al-Naḥl:36; Al-Mu'minūn:44; Al-Nisā':164; Ghāfir:78.
[49] Al-Baqarah: 213.
[50] According to a prophetic tradition, it is said *"kullu maulūdin yūladu ʿala al-fiṭrah"* (Every human being is born in the state of *fiṭrah*).
[51] See: Al-Aʿrāf:172.
[52] See: Al-Rūm:30-32.
[53] On the authority of Muslim.

genealogically are closer to Islam, acknowledgment of their existence is more categorical and specific, while other religions are just mentioned generally and indirectly. But this, according to the writer, definitely does not diminish the respect of Islam towards other religions universally. Furthermore, the universality of prophethood phenomenon is actually merely natural in line with the very need of logical consistency of the perfect divine justice.[54]

Again, from this perspective, it is very natural and rational that a human being is unceasingly reminded and invited by the Qur'an to return back to *Ḥanīfism* or Islam[55] whenever and wherever he got lost in his journey as a result of human distortions of religious beliefs.

D. Conclusion

The truth-claim is natural to religion. Further, it is the essence of the identity of a religion. In this regard, Professor Ismāʿīl R. al-Fārūqī persuasively remarked: "The (truth) claim is essential to religion. For the religious assertion is not merely one among a multitude of propositions, but necessarily unique and exclusive."[56] Therefore, any attempt to relativize the uniqueness and exclusiveness of religious truth-claims, such as the so-called *religious pluralism* (that all religions are but different soteriological "spaces" within which, or "ways" through which, men can find salvation/liberation/enlightenment/fulfilment), will inevitably end up in adding a new problem to the existing one at best, and threatening the very existence of religions at worst.[57]

The Islamic concept of "*Ḥanīfism*" (*al-ḥanīfiyyah*), which is the "Divine" treatment of non-Islamic religions and established by Allah The Almighty in His revelation, the Qur'an, is worth presenting to find the rational and humane solution to the problem. Because, so far as human experience can trace, it is the only system that allows *the others to be fully others* without any sort of reduction, distortion and relativization. Consequently, on the practical level Islam acknowledges, and therefore offers to the followers of all religions, "the plurality of laws" to govern their lives, each under the aegis of its own principles and laws.[58] And this is, in fact, the best gift of Islam to humankind, which no system in the world, even the modern democracy, dares do so.

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[54] See: Al-Isrā':15.
[55] See: Āli ʿImrān:20.
[56] Ismāʿīl R. Al-Fārūqī, 'Meta-Religion: Towards A Critical World Theology', p. 40.
[57] Hence, stigmatizing religion as evil because of, among others, the claims to truth it makes, as suggested by Charles Kimball in his *When Religion Becomes Evil*, is evil in itself. For details, see: Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2002).
[58] See: Ismāʿīl R. Al-Fārūqī, 'Meta-Religion: Towards A Critical World Theology', p. 57.