

RELIGIOUS HARMONY IS RELIGIOUS PLURALISM THE WAY?

Dr. Hemlata Krishnani

Department of Philosophy, Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi, Delhi-110002

E-mail: hllkrishnani@ms.du.ac.in

ABSTRACT

The contemporary world exhibits a diversity of religions with every religion having its devoted adherents. For a harmonious life, it is crucial to have a favourable attitude towards other world religions and faiths. A constructive role from people is required to address the issues related to religion. Such issues have acquired significance, attention, and intensity in contemporary times because of globalization and technological advancements. Any action would now lead to worldwide reaction and thus our responsibility to act wisely increases manifold. The question is what should be our response to this multiplicity of religions? We need to respond to this diversity in a positive way so that it turns out to be an asset and not a threat. If we understand and accept diversity our attitude towards it would be more accommodating than conflicting. This paper discusses the response of Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Religious Pluralism to the multiplicity of religions prevalent by stating their main tenets using narrative review methodology. A pluralistic view of religious diversity asserts that all religions are equally good. Religions should be allowed to coexist and be respected. Exclusivism, on the other hand, affirms that a particular religion is the most valuable and the only way to attain liberation. Inclusive theories try to achieve a middle ground between exclusivism and pluralism by acknowledging that other religions have significant religious values while also agreeing with exclusivism that there is one religion closer to the truth than the others. The paper further discusses the Sikh view on the multiplicity of religions highlighting Guru Nanak Dev's philosophy which stresses the equality of all religions. The philosophical problems concerning religious pluralism are laid down. An argument is provided to show how pluralism promotes religious harmony. Despite conceptual difficulties, the implication of religious pluralism in society is seen as progressive and leading to much-desired religious harmony.

Keywords: *Religious harmony, exclusivism, inclusivism, religious pluralism, diversity*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era, the awareness of the diversity of religious beliefs is well recognized. The rise of disciplines like comparative religion and comparative theology has led to a keen understanding of various religions. In addition, such a study brings about an appreciation for varying religious traditions and an acceptance of the fact that religions differ significantly in belief and practice. This increased awareness of the world's religions, whether through current media, human experiences, or education, raises new questions. How should we perceive different religious traditions? The core notions fundamental to the major religions of the world are the nature of the Ultimate Reality, the nature of Self and Soteriology. According to Meister (2014), religion is a system of beliefs and practices and includes a belief in an ultimate transcendent reality which is non-physical. The meaning and purpose of life are provided by attaining unity with this Ultimate Reality. (Meister, 2014) There are not only diverse and conflicting views on these core aspects of religion but there are many disagreements even with respect to the nature of Ultimate Reality and our relation to it. In fact, scholars mention seven aspects of religious systems- doctrinal, philosophical, mythical, ethical, legal, ritual, personal, social, and artistic (Smart, 1996). The major religions differ in all these aspects. Thus, it becomes important to reflect on what should be one's response to religious diversity. There are several responses to religious diversity. The generally cited responses are - exclusivists, inclusivists, and pluralists. This division was first proposed by Alan Race (1983).

Exclusivists

This is the group of those religious followers who believe that the central doctrines beliefs and practices of only one religion are solely and objectively true and that is the religion to which they belong. They maintain that because the central religious claims of the major religions contradict one another so logically they all cannot be true together. According to them for a religious man, it is important to follow the one correct path, to believe in the truth claims of one true religion because that is an essential condition of salvation or liberation. They further claim that their religion is the only viable path to attain salvation and so is the closest to religious truth. An exclusivist holds that the beliefs of other religions are incorrect and so they are not valuable. Sometimes this disagreement leads to intolerance and even violence towards the believers of divergent religious views.

Pluralists

This group of religious followers believe that all major religions have a distinctive relationship with the Ultimate Real. One can reach God by following any religion. God revealed Himself in various geographical locations through various entities and in various circumstances. Each religion has a set of beliefs or practices which are true and each provides a path which works successfully towards achieving liberation. Therefore, there are several ways to salvation. According to John Hick, Religious pluralism looks at the major world religions as very divergent but equally well-founded methods of thinking, encountering, and acknowledging the ultimate reality (Hick, 1995). The all-important element of religion surpasses the myriad beliefs and practices that constitute the various religious traditions. Every religion perceives the Absolute in its own unique way. An individual experiences the ultimate through the lens of his or her cultural and religious notions and knows his ultimate as Allah, Parmeshwar or Waheguru and so on. Pluralism is thus characterized by humbleness regarding one's own religion and aims at meaningful dialogue and mutual understanding with other religions. and J.Hick's Pluralistic hypothesis considers all religions as viable paths which lead to one God.

Inclusivists

This is the group of religious followers who believe there is one true notion of an Ultimate reality and one true account of salvation or liberation. They acknowledge that there is a difference of opinion about these fundamental issues among world religions and maintain the view that one religion is closer to the truth than the others. According to McKim (2012) the inclusivists consider all religions equally significant about fundamental religious matters but one tradition describes the object of religion and the process of salvation more accurately. The central doctrines, beliefs, and practices of only one religion are solely and objectively true. The other religious traditions contain elements that are true or effective. All those who seek the truth and the good can attain liberation whether or not they are aware of the religious beliefs of the correct religion.

Sikhism on multiplicity of religions

The response of Sikhism to religious diversity is derived from the metaphysical views of Guru Nanak Dev ji rather than from epistemological principles. In Guru Granth Sahib ji, the Sikh scripture which incorporates the vision of the Sikh Gurus, we find many references to the fact of many religions. Upon attaining enlightenment, Guru Nanak Dev Ji said, "There is no Hindu, no Muslim." *Na koi Hindu na koi musalman*. (Kaur & Singh, 2000, p. 4)

According to Guru Nanak Dev ji the Creator is One and pervades the entire universe just as a soul pervades the body. God is omnipresent, his activity is felt everywhere in the universe.

“The seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks and months and various seasons originate from One Sun; O Nanak, in just the same way, the many forms originate from the Creator.” (*Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, n.d., pp. 12–13)

The human and the divine soul are identical to one another. This oneness of God is strongly emphasized in Guru Nanak Dev’s philosophy. God is not only the creator of the world but he also manifests himself, as a soul, in the entire created world. He is thus present in all beings and things throughout the universe.

“One God created all men;
All men are moulded of the same clay;
Recognize the Lord's light within all, and do not consider social class or status;
There are no classes or castes in the world hereafter.” (*Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, n.d., p. 349)

This doctrine of the unity of humans with God is then transformed into the social concept of equality among all humans. All humans are equal among themselves and equal before him, irrespective of caste, creed, religion, gender, or any other social distinctions. Thus, we can say that it is not that Guru Nanak Dev Ji urges religious pluralism, but rather that this position arises from the way he describes the nature of ultimate reality.

One of the compositions of Guru Gobind Singh clearly brings out the equality of all human beings, ‘Manas ki Jat sabai ekai pahichanbo’ (Sahni, 2018, p. 569)

Thus, Guru Nanak Dev ji and Sikh philosophical thoughts reflect respect for all religions and acceptance of the prevalence of many religions. Guru Nanak Dev ji believed that all religions have similar purposes and goals. All are different paths leading to the same destination. Religious nomenclature is impermanent and disappears as and when the body disintegrates.

There are many instances from the life of Guru Nanak Dev Ji which point out his views on both the equality of all religions and equal space for multifarious religions. An episode in the Janamsakhis relates to Guru Nanak's visit to Multan. Persons of various religious traditions met the Guru with a bowl filled to the brim with milk, implying thereby that the place already had all the religious traditions represented there and that there was no place for a new one. Guru Nanak is said to have placed a flower petal on the milk, thereby indicating that his faith though distinct is not an attempt to replace any but will co-exist with others. Besides such incidents, Mardana, a Muslim by birth, and lifelong companion of Guru Nanak Dev Ji was never asked by Guru to convert, emphasizing Guru Nanak Dev Ji’s respect for all religions.

The essence of religion and all ways of spiritual living is the sabd :

“Some call the Lord ‘Ram, Ram’, and some ‘Khuda’.
Some serve Him as ‘Gusain’ (Jesus), others as ‘Allah’.
He is the Cause of causes, and Generous.
He showers His Grace and Mercy upon us.
Some call themselves Muslim, and some call themselves Hindu.
Some yearn for paradise, and others long for heaven.
Says Nanak, one who realizes the Hukam of God’s Will,
knows the secrets of his Lord Master.” (*Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, n.d., p. 885)

Religion and morality

Guru Nanak Ji and John Hick both consider morality as an important aspect of religion. Guru Nanak Ji preached that it does not matter to which religion a person belongs to, what is valuable is the deeds that one performs. Being religious is not just adhering to a particular set of religious beliefs but it consists in being righteous. Guru Nanak Ji says “Truth is high, but higher still is truthful living.” According to him, one should choose truthful, honest, and moral ways of living. One should be just, fair, and righteous as these virtues connect with spiritual awakening and bring one closer to God. (*Living Truthfully*, 2019). There are multiple paths leading to one Ultimate and salvation is available to all those who walk the path of righteousness, by performing virtuous deeds, by chanting His name, practising, and contemplating the teachings of their prophets and saints. An adherent of any religion can achieve salvation.

On the other hand, for Hick too, morality is an important feature essential to any religion. He says, that within each major religion, we witness a transition from being “self-centeredness to reality-centeredness”. (Hick, 1985, pp. 36–37). Each religion brings out effectively a transition from ordinary human existence which is characterized as trivial and unsatisfactory to an existence which is blissful, significant, and liberating. This soteriological transformation is recognized by all great religious traditions. Due to their success in transforming and saving or liberating people, all the great traditions are appropriate responses to the Real (Rogers, 2009). It is primarily because of their success in the personal moral transformation that major world religions have endured over the years. Compassion, charity, and selflessness are among their core values. A person’s moral evolution is key to a successful religion (Meister, 2014).

ARGUMENT: Religious Pluralism promotes religious harmony

1. Each major religion of the world believes in an Ultimate Reality beyond the physical world.
2. Each religion has a specific notion of its nature and set of religious beliefs and practices.
3. Each one has a belief as to a viable path towards Liberation or Salvation.
4. It is not the case that any one religious tradition holds the exclusive truths about Ultimate Reality and offers the only path to Salvation.
5. So, we should adopt an amiable attitude towards other religious beliefs, customs and practices resulting in the harmonious co-existence of various religions.

Practicing religious pluralism can help us to give up the attitude of arrogance and be more accepting of other faiths, beliefs and practices. Our attitude towards other faiths should be of acceptance and respect. And this is the key notion of religious pluralism.

PROBLEMS

For religious believers’ religious statements like ‘thou art that’ or ek Onkar (there is only one God) or ‘Lord is Divine’ are cognitively true. They are not merely expressions of subjective attitudes. The believer believes in the truth of the situation described by such statements. Consequently, some critics argue that religious pluralism fails to accurately reflect the beliefs and language of religious people regarding the religious language they use in general (*Religious Pluralism*, n.d.).

According to some critics, religious pluralism negates any possibility of a historical divine revelation. Some religions are based on historical evidence. Other religions, however, are not based on verifiable facts (Zed, 2016).

Also, the major religions of the world hold incompatible and exclusive views on various religious notions like the nature of ultimate reality, salvation, prayer, grace, world and self-etc. it is then contradictory to say that all religions offer equally valid ways of conceiving and responding to Ultimate Reality (Meister, 2014).

According to Hick a person's religious experiences and descriptions depend on how they are interpreted and framed. It is the same reality but experienced differently - either personally and theistically or impersonally and pantheistically. Our interpretations are influenced by concepts ingrained in our culture and tradition, values, and practices we are nurtured with. But such an account will not then provide a precise picture of the Ultimate Real which is a critical epistemological restriction of religious pluralism. We have no basis for knowing whether attributes like omniscience, omnipotence, benevolence, loving caring etc which we use to portray the ultimately real are accurate descriptions of that reality or whether they are psychological projections or mere wish fulfilment (Meister, 2014).

CONCLUSION

To conclude we can say that the philosophical problems stated above are genuine for a religious adherent. A religious believer seeks God, wants to know his true nature, and yearns to be in his vicinity. His ardent desire is to know the God he worships. Religious pluralism seems to do away with the possibility of ultimate truth. All religious beliefs become culturally constructed explications that do not correspond to actual reality (Jones, 2008).

But at the same time, religious pluralism offers a very progressive attitude towards the diversity of religions. In order to achieve a better world, religions must coexist harmoniously, share concepts, cooperate, and understand and respect the distinctness and uniqueness of others' belief systems. Religious pluralism is the need of the hour, surpassing religious and non-religious demographic lines. It is the voice of the masses turbulent by religious conflicts. From a pragmatic point of view, the realization of the similarities and purposes can foster love, brotherhood, and solidarity instead of fear, arrogance and narrow individualism. Religious pluralism emphasises dialogue, which seeks understanding amid the differences and can thus be an effective tool in promoting religious harmony (*Religious Pluralism*, n.d.).

REFERENCES

- Hick, J. (1985). *Problems of Religious Pluralism*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hick, J. (1995). *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Jones, M. S. (2007). The problem of religious pluralism. *Faculty Publications and Presentations*, 4. https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/phil_fac_pubs/4
- Jones, M. S. (2008). The problem of religious pluralism. *Faculty Publications and Presentations*, 4.
- Kaur, M., & Singh, P. (Eds.). (2000). *Some insights into sikhism*. Guru Nanak Dev University Press.

- Living truthfully*. (2019). Discover Guru Nanak. <https://discovergurunanak.com/living-truthfully/#:~:text=There%20is%20a%20famous%20saying,to%20the%20practice%20of%20Sikhism>
- McKim, R. (2012). *On Religious Diversity*. Oxford University Press.
- Meister, C. (2014). *Philosophy of religion*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Race, A. (1983). *Christians and religious pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*. Orbis Books.
- Religious Pluralism*. (n.d.). Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/rel-plur/>
- Rogers, M. A. (2009). Exclusivism in Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. *Aporia*, 19(1).
- Sahni, A. (2018). The idea of religious pluralism in sikhism. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 6(2), 568–571.
- Smart, N. (1996). *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. Univ of California Press.
- Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (K. Thind, Trans.). (n.d.). SriGranth. <https://www.srigranth.org/servlet/gurbani.gurbani>
- Zed, R. (2016). *Faith Forum: Is religious pluralism an opportunity or a problem?* Reno Gazette-Journal. <https://www.rgj.com/story/opinion/columnists/2016/02/12/faith-forum-religious-pluralism-opportunity-problem/80314456/>