ISLAM AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

MUḤAMMAD LEGENHAUSEN

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The phenomenon of religious diversity is one of the questions with which today's religious thought is faced. Muslim thinkers have tried to deal with this question according to their intellectual tendencies and positions. Obviously none of the answers proposed is perfectly right and ultimate, and so the door should remain open for further discussion. The present study is the effort of one Muslim thinker, in which he tries to analyse and criticize some of the answers to the question of religious diversity, especialy the religious pluralism which is advocated by its famous proponet John Hick. Then he goes on to propose an Islamic answer on the basis of Islamic sources.

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

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Introduction

The phenomenon of religious diversity is one of the questions with which today's religious thought is faced. The existence of communities in which people of different religious traditions live together and the expansion of social relationships and communication at the threshold of the third millennium are among the reasons for paying attention to this vital issue. The main question is how to better understand and account for the diversity of religions? Is one of these faiths the only authentic, perfect and true religion and are others invalid and untrue human constructions? Or can we see the light of the truth in all the world's religions so they are to be regarded as different mirrors in which the sunlight of truth and salvation is

reflected? If only the adherents of one particular religion can obtain salvation, then how is God's mercy, love, and guidance to be understood? On the other hand, if the possibility of salvation obtains for all adherents of various religions, then how can different people with such radically different religious convictions attain salvation? Such important and vexed questions as these are the main problems of religious diversity.

Muslim thinkers have tried to deal with these questions according to their intellectual tendencies and positions. Obviously none of the answers proposed is perfectly right and ultimate, and so the door should remain open for further discussion. The present study is the effort of one Muslim thinker, in which he tries to analyse and criticizes some of the answers to the question of religious diversity , especialy the religious pluralism which is advocated

by its famous proponet John Hick. Then he goes on to propose an Islamic answer on the basis of Islamic sources.

Of course the publication of this book does not necessarily mean that the Islamic Culture and Communication Organization subscribes to the whole content of the book. We are grateful to Dr. Legenhausen for his effort to take the current discussion of religious diversity seriously and to find an Islamic response to it. We should also thank Mr. Saeed Edalat Nezhad, the director of the department of Islamic Studies, who proposed the idea and supervised its process to the end. We also thank our brothers at the Taha Cultural Institute who co-operated with us in the publication of the book.

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1. Part One: Liberalism and Pluralism



1. 1. *Introduction to Part One*

The history of the world's religions is full of horrible tales of persecution and intolerance. Often times the religious opposition to the beliefs of a people has been used to serve colonialist purposes, as in the treatment of Native American peoples by Christian Europeans. It is not surprising to find that with increased awareness of this history, and of the beliefs and customs of others, among sincere Christians there also comes compassion, regret for what has been done in the past, and a resolve to prevent its recurrence. This is one of the major motivations of Christian religious pluralism.

European religious intolerance, however, is intrareligious as well as interreligious. Indeed, the development of political liberalism in eighteenth century Europe was largely fueled by a rejection of the religious intolerance exhibited in the sectarian wars of the Reformation period.

While liberalism was the political response to diversity of beliefs within the Christian community, its tenets were extended to non-Christian beliefs only in the twentieth century. Even in the late nineteenth century, the Mormon sect was considered sufficiently heretical to lie beyond the pale of proper Christianity and as such was publicly denounced by the U.S. President Garfield (1881) in his inaugural address. The issue was polygamy, which at that time was legitimate according to the Mormon elders of the Church of the Latter Day Saints. Is the number of wives a man may have to be regulated by his religion or by the government? For President Garfield the answer was obvious:

> Nor can any ecclesiastical organization be safely permitted to usurp in the smallest degree the functions and powers of the National Government.[1]

But the failure of liberal efforts to successfully eradicate religious intolerance was nowhere more manifest than in the rise of anti-Semitism and its institutionalization by the fascists. Eventually, the fascists were defeated and the liberal tolerance of non-Christian beliefs was written into the Declaration of Human Rights, but within Catholic Churches around the world, the Jews continued to be cursed as Christ killers. It was only in the 1960's, with the Second Vatican Council, that reference in the Mass to the "perfidious Jews" was expunged. This background of religious intolerance and the rise of liberalism must be kept in mind in order to understand what has come to be called "religious pluralism".

Religious pluralism is the outcome of an attempt to provide a basis in Christian theology for tolerance of non-Christian religions; as such, it is an element in a kind of religious modernism or liberalism. Religious pluralists assert that all the major religions of mankind offer paths to salvation, and that they all contain religious truth. Furthermore, what I shall call reductive religious pluralism includes the claims that

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[1] Quoted from Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. IV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 202; Schaff also mentions with approval the anti-Mormon policies of President Hayes, who was succeeded by Garfield. It is worth noting that Schaff's discussion of the Mormons occurs as a digression from his condemnation of Muslim polygamy.

in addition to the assertions mentioned above, salvation is gained through the common truth found in the religions, and that the differences among the religions are relative.. The reductive nature of liberal theology's approach to religious pluralism is clearly observed by the Finnish New Testament scholar, Heikki Räisänen:

> [T]he actual pluralism of the religious traditions forces a scholar concerned with truth-questions to a certain kind of reductionism which will affect the model of Christianity which emerges: he is bound to reduce the often absolute claims found in his sources to a more relative size, if for no other reason than that he has to relate them to claims found in other sources (unless he is content with simply reproducing rival claims). Taking one's sources seriously cannot possibly mean that the scholar must give everything the same significance as the sources themselves do. For instance, it is impossible to accept simultaneously on an objective level both the claims made by the New Testament writers about Jesus and the claims made in the Qur'an about the revelations received by Muhammad.[2]

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[2] Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 135-136, quoted by John Kent, "The Character and Possibility of Christian Theology Today," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed., ...

No matter how laudable the intentions of those who have advanced religious pluralism, and no matter how much we may sympathize with their struggle against entrenched intolerance, the theological project is severely flawed, and its flaws are not unrelated to those found in liberal political philosophy. In order to recognize these flaws, we first need to become acquainted with the basic outline of the historical development and the central ideas of religious and political liberalism. Then we will turn to an examination and criticism of the theology of the most outspoken contemporary advocate of religious pluralism, John Hick. Finally, we shall advance an approach to religious pluralism consonant with important strands of thought in Islamic theology which is free of the difficulties attributed to liberal religious pluralism, particularly, its reductionism.

Although liberalism in religion and in politics bear significant historical and theoretical relations to one another, they ought not to be confused. The term "liberalism" was first used to designate a political ideology in late nineteenth century Europe, and it was in the same period and locale that the theological movement initiated by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) came to be known as liberal Protestantism. Although there are liberal Protestants who are not politically liberal, and political liberals who have no use for religious liberalism, the attitudes toward moral, social and political issues among religious and political liberals are often reflections of the same basic ideas and attitudes, particularly as these pertain to the relations between religion and politics.

Peter Byrne and Leslie Houlden (London: Routledge, 1995), 879.

1. 2. *Political Liberalism*

As a political ideology, liberalism does not have any precise definition, although all liberals emphasize the importance of tolerance, individual rights and freedoms to safeguard a pluralism of life styles. A wide variety of political theorists have been called liberal, some of the more important of whom are Adam Smith (1723-1790), Thomas Paine (1737-1809), Benjamine Constant (1767-1830), James Madison (1751-1836), and, perhaps of the greatest philosophical importance, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). The ideas of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1634-1704) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) have had a tremendous influence on liberal theory, even if Locke and Kant cannot themselves be called liberals, let alone Hobbes. Among contemporary philosophers John Rawls is undoubtedly the champion of liberalism about whom the most has been written, although attention has also been given to the forms of liberalism advanced by Aron, Berlin, Dewey, Dworkin, Habermas, Hayek, Popper and Rorty, to mention but a few.

Most liberals agree that liberalism is to be traced to the aftermath of the Reformation. Freedom of conscience in religious matters came first, and was then extended to other areas of opinion. So, tolerance of different opinions about religion lies at the very foundations of political liberalism, and religious pluralism may be viewed as a very late arrival which seeks to provide a theological basis for this tolerance. Characteristic of political liberalism is a sharp division between the public and the private, and the assertion that individuals enjoy a number of rights which safeguard the private realm from interference by the

state. Secularism is the first product of the liberal separation of the private from the public. Foremost among the individual rights protecting the private realm is freedom of opinion, especially religious opinion, which gradually has been transformed into the notion of freedom of expression.

In order to protect individual liberties, liberals have advocated the constitutional government of nation states, the rule of law, representative democracy and market economies. Utilitarianism provided the philosophical underpinning to the dominant form of nineteenth century liberalism. Contemporary liberalisms range from *libertarian* views, according to which the role of the state is to be minimized, to liberal socialism. While the rights advocated by liberals were often restricted in practice to white European males, liberals have been instrumental in the struggle for their universal extension and have led movements for universal suffrage, the abolition of slavery, prison reform and equal rights for women, minorities, the disabled and, most recently, homosexuals. In the mid-twentieth century, *welfare-state liberalism* became predominant, according to which various kinds of equality are to be protected by the state. Rawls describes his own welfare-state liberalism as one which gives priority to the principles of justice over those of the good. Sometimes this point is explained with the claim that liberalism advocates a procedural concept of justice rather than a substantive one. The principles of justice, according to Rawls, are to minimize disadvantage while allowing individuals to pursue their own ends. This point is especially important, because many religious outlooks include a conception of the good to which the principles of justice are considered derivative. This opens the way for opposition between religious and

liberal principles of justice, so that rather than playing the role of the neutral arbiter among disputing religious factions, the liberal becomes just one more party to the conflict.

In recent years, critics of liberal political theory have argued that the neutral pretenses of liberalism are a sham. Despite its claims to neutrality, liberals have their own substantive values and ideals, and a tradition in which these values and ideals have been modified and pursued, often in conflict with religious traditions.[3]

The application of liberal theory in the United States has not always exhibited the homogenizing force it currently displays. In the past, even though religions could not be officially established, there was sufficient local autonomy to allow for the enactment into law of precepts stemming from the religious views which prevailed in various regions. The continued prohibition of alcohol in various counties is a reminder of how distinctive religious practice-claims found their way into civil law. The struggle between community rights and individual rights in the United States has a long and sometimes bloody history. In retrospect, the defeat of the autonomy of the community seems an almost inevitable consequence of the consistent application of liberal theory. The movement toward the maximization of individual liberty is at the same time a movement by central authority to restrict the legislative power of local communities.

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[3] For a good review of this sort of criticism of liberalism, with particular focus on Rawls, see Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians,* 2nd ed., (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

Liberalism was raised in Christian Europe and America, so that liberals have often presupposed the Christian values that informed their societies. But as the movement to protect individual liberties by law has been extended, liberalism has evolved into a political ideology which, under the banner of individual rights and freedom, has repeatedly collided with religious organizations within modern liberal societies, particularly in such areas as family law, schooling and medicine. The conflicts between the Western and Islamic worlds often display the same structure. Western propaganda justifies interference in the Islamic world on the grounds of the need to defend the rights of religious minorities, women, homosexuals, and others, while Islamic propaganda emphasizes the need for Muslims to protect themselves from a cultural invasion that threatens the religious character of their societies. As liberalism spreads and is reflected in law, authority is taken away from religious institutions and placed in the hands of the state.

Religious pluralism contributes to the hegemony of liberalism by providing a theological position from which to attack religious authority. Religious authority is based on religious knowledge, particularly on knowledge of God's commands. On the basis of its claims to knowledge of God's commands, a religious institution may claim authority to propagate and enforce those commands. Liberals deny the right of religious authority on the basis of the individual rights of persons to their own religious beliefs. However, liberal doctrine does not require a denial of all claims to exclusive religious knowledge. The liberal claim is procedural: differences of all kinds, including religious differences, are to be permitted unless they interfere with the rights and freedoms of

others. Authority is taken away from religious institutions by liberals not because the liberal denies the claim to religious knowledge advanced on behalf of the religious institution, but as a practical method to resolve conflicting claims to this sort of knowledge and authority. The religious pluralist goes further by claiming that religious truth is to be found in various religious traditions. Hence, the institutions of no single tradition can claim exclusive knowledge on which to base their authority. Authority then falls by default into the hands of the liberal state.

1. 3. *From Liberal Protestantism to Religious Pluralism*

Liberal Protestantism may be defined in terms of the following features: (1) a receptive attitude toward unorthodox interpretations of Christian scripture and dogma, particularly when informed by attention to claims of the natural sciences and history; (2) a general skepticism toward rational speculation in theology; (3) an emphasis on religious support for modern moral principles and social reform consonant with such principles; and (4) the doctrine that the essence of religion lies in personal religious experience rather than in dogma, canon, community or ritual. While religious liberalism is sometimes identified with modernism, liberal Protestantism is best seen more specifically as a particularly influential form of modernism, where the term "modernism" is used for all religious reform movements which focus on the need for religion to accommodate itself to the realities of the modern world.

The evolution of religious pluralism from liberal Protestantism has been gradual. Elements of religious pluralism may be found in the writings of the founder of liberal Protestantism, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), whose thinking has been extremely influential on that of the leading contemporary exponent of religious pluralism, John Hick.[4] Schleiermacher himself defended the superiority of

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[4] See the conclusion of *The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Theocentric Model of the Christian Theology of World Religions: An Elaboration and Evaluation of the Position of John Hick* by Gregory H. Carruthers, S.J., (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990).

Christianity over all other forms of religion. Nevertheless, he considered religion to be essentially personal and private. The essence of religion lies in the soul of man dissolved in the immediate feeling of the Infinite, Schleiermacher declared, and not in systems of religious doctrine, nor in any other outward forms.[5] According to Schleiermacher, this inward religious experience is the essence of all religions. The origin of religion is to be found in the immediate feeling which is the human response to the ultimate, and not in knowledge or morals. This feeling becomes manifest and polluted in the forms of the historical religions. The multiplicity of religions, according to Schleiermacher, results from the varied human religious feelings and experiences, and as such, all the religions contain divine truth. Nevertheless, they reflect different stages of spiritual development, and the most highly developed form of faith, Schleiermacher contends, is that exemplified in Christianity, because Christ exemplifies the highest possible form of religious experience, which he communicates to Christians who have fellowship in him.

Another giant in the liberal Protestant tradition, Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), also affirmed the idea that all religions have a common essence. Otto was a German Lutheran theologian who taught at Göttingen and Marburg (and even served as Vicar of the German Church at Cannes for a short time). He was deeply influenced by Schleiermacher's thinking, and even

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[5] See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper, 1958), cited in Glyn Richards, *Towards a Theology of Religions* (London: Routledge, 1989), 37.

edited a centenary edition of the latter's *On Religion* (1899). In his most influential work, *Das Heilige* (1917), Otto claims that the essence of all religion is the *holy*, and although the concept of the holy includes both rational and non-rational elements, he asserts that it is the non-rational element that lies at its core. Otto calls this non-rational core the *numinous.*[6] Numinous feelings accompanied by awe and dread give the impression of being confronted by what Otto calls the *mysterium tremendum.* Numinous feelings accompanied by wonder, reverence and love are a response to the other aspect of the divine, the *mysterium fascinans.* Otto's interest in world religions, particularly the religions of India, was not merely academic. In the 1920's he founded an interreligious league to foster spirituality and morals through cooperation among believers of different faiths, and this won him the condemnation of many Christian scholars, although he was well received by the Hindu clergy.

Schleiermacher and Otto both claim that there is a common core or essence of religion. The roots of the idea that there is an essence of religion may be traced to Hegel (1770-1831). Hegel posited religion as a transcendent idea that unfolds in various expressions through the course of history. But whereas Hegel was concerned with religion as the transcendent essence of

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[6] This word is derived from the Latin *numen* which signifies divine power or presence. Parallel work on the holy was done a few years earlier by the Swedish Lutheran theologian Nathan Söderblom, although he did not share Otto's enthusiasm for interreligious cooperation. See Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion, A History,* 2nd ed., (La Salle: Open Court, 1986), 161 ff., 257.

a social phenomenon, for Schleiermacher and Otto, the essence of religion is to be found in private interior experience. Religion for them is not so much a social phenomena, nor is it primarily a matter of belief and doctrine, nor practices and precepts, but rather a feeling that grips the soul.

The doctrine of an essence of religion has usually been constructed in parallel fashion to a doctrine of an essence of Christianity. The essence doctrines were attractive to liberal Protestant theologians because they could use them to explain away the differences among Christian sects, and to relativize the changes that had occurred in the Church in the modern world.

Often the nineteenth century Christian writers who proposed various theories of the essence of religion also proposed a kind of evolutionary defense of Christianity. This can be found in both Hegel and Schleiermacher, despite their very different concepts of the essence of religion. For Hegel, Christianity is the most complete religion because religion itself is seen as the manifestation of the transcendent in history, and the most complete form of manifestation imaginable is that of incarnation. For Schleiermacher, on the other hand, what makes Christianity great is the religious experience of divinity incarnate communicated through the church. For such thinkers, the essence of religion is understood as most fully manifest in Christianity, and the other religions are seen as steps preparing the way to Christianity. Islam presents an awkward problem for such thinkers, since it came after Christianity, but they usually explain that a proper understanding of Christianity was not found in Arabia prior to Islam, so that Islam could still serve as a preliminary to Christianity for the Arabs.

One of the most important liberal Protestant theologians to challenge this sort of view was Ernst

Troeltsch (1865-1923). Troeltsch spent his academic life in the attempt to find a way to reconcile historical relativism with the absolute claims of Christianity. He claimed that the modern historical approach to religious studies made it impossible to defend the superiority of Christianity by means of an argument from miracles, as had been common among Christian theologians since the Middle Ages. The skeptical stance taken in modern history toward miracles does not allow an exception in the case of Christianity. If miracles are accepted by the historian, the consistent use of his method will require the acceptance of the miracle reports common among all the religions of the world. Despair over miracle defenses of Christianity made it attractive to attempt an evolutionary argument, whether along the lines of Hegel or Schleiermacher. But Troeltsch argued that what was claimed by such thinkers to be the essence of religion perfected in Christianity was more a reflection of liberal theologians' own religious attitudes rather than the result of any objective historical study. History does not show a gradual movement toward the most advanced form of religion, but rather a diversity of religions, from the most primitive to the most sophisticated, existing side by side in various cultures at various periods. Troeltsch attempted to defend the absolute validity of Christianity and its superiority to other religions on the grounds of its universal intuitive appeal. He claimed that the Indian and Chinese religions were limited because each of them depends upon a rather peculiar form of philosophical speculation elevated to the status of dogma. He displayed his misunderstanding of Islam when he claimed that like Judaism and Zoroastrianism, it is nationalistic rather than universal in its appeal. But Troeltsch has not become famous for his defense of

Christianity, but for his rejection of the claim that there is an essence of religion. History, he claimed, does not support the view that there is an essence of religion, although all religions have a common goal in the Beyond or Unknown, and a common source in the divine spirit. In his later writings he gave up the attempt to prove the absolute truth of Christianity and confessed that the truth of Christianity is only relative to Christian culture. In other cultures other religions are equally valid. Thus, in his mature writings we find a religious relativism quite similar to contemporary religious pluralism, for Troeltsch held that all the religions contain a relative truth, that their particular forms are determined by culture, and that each religion is normative only for its own followers.[7]

The idea that the study of history shows that no religion can claim absolute validity because it shows that all the religions are rooted in historically determined cultural conditions is by no means unique to Troeltsch. The German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) was the son of a Lutheran pastor, edited Schleiermacher's letters and wrote an unfinished biography of Schleiermacher, and Schleiermacher's influence on his philosophy shows up in his attempt to extend Schleiermacher's theory of *hermeneutics* to all forms of cultural expression, especially history. He held that all the religions were products of human history, and therefore, that only

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[7] Glyn Richards, *Towards a Theology of Religions* (London: Routledge, 1989), 25-31. Also see the article on Troeltsch in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, where Troeltsch is praised for his insight and historical acuteness, but whose views are deemed unacceptably relativistic.

history, rather than religion, could reveal to man his true nature. The development of new methods of historical analysis and evaluation of the reliability of texts in the nineteenth century brought about what Dilthey called a new historical consciousness, which, he claimed, revealed the relativity of every religious and metaphysical claim. While Dilthey wrote as a philosopher rather than as a theologian, he has had a profound influence on liberal Protestant theologians, even those who reject his extreme historical relativism.

The influence of the new historical consciousness on the assessment of religion can also be found in the writings of the great English historian, Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975). In addition to his well known twelve volume *The Study of History,* he also delivered lectures on *Christianity Among the Religions of the World*[8] in both the Episcopal Theological School of Cambridge and New York's Union Theological Seminary. Toynbee pays due heed to the cultural factors which have influenced and continue to influence the development of the religions of the world, with particular focus on the case of Christianity. But Toynbee is not content with the statement that a truth relative to each culture is to be found in its religions. He calls for reform. He suggests that Christianity should disassociate itself from what is unique to Western civilization, and, more significantly, that Christians should give up the doctrine that Christianity is the only true religion, and the exclusive and intolerant attitude toward other

[8] Arnold Toynbee, *Christianity Among the Religions of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

religions that accompanies this doctrine. While he remained an Anglican, he confessed that he would probably fail any test for orthodoxy, and although he did not advocate the formation of a new religion combined from the elements of various traditions, called *syncretism*, like Otto, he has been accused of this.[9]

Such thinkers as Troeltsch, Dilthey and Toynbee have been called *historicists* because they claimed that various manifestations of culture, including religion, are to be understood as the natural products of historical processes. Hegelian and Marxist historicists advocated the additional claim that such historical processes occur in accordance with laws that may be discovered and used to predict future events (or at least movements) in much the same way that the physical sciences have progressed by enabling prediction and control through the discovery of law. Karl Popper's rejection of historicism is grounded in an appreciation of the differences between historical methods and those of the natural sciences, and ridicules unwarranted optimism about prediction and control and the discovery of historical laws, while this sort of nineteenth century historicism did not feature prominently in those who were not Hegelians or Marxists. The most important theological change brought about by the new historical consciousness was in the way in which sacred scripture was to be treated. Previously, Christian scholars had taken the Bible to be an authoritative source of historical knowledge. With the new historical consciousness, on the other

[9] See the article, "Arnold Toynbee" in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia.*

hand, the historical claims of the Bible came to be treated exactly like the historical claims found in any other text. When one tries to evaluate Christianity in comparison with other religions of the world from this perspective, one finds no reason to assert that Christianity is the unique divinely ordained religion. This paves the way for religious pluralism.

If one is able to maintain religious faith along side the kind of historicism described above, and it must be remembered that historicism emerged within the liberal Protestant tradition, on which it subsequently has had a tremendous impact, the faith that remains will be significantly at odds with its more conservative expressions. Doctrines of the church come to be seen as reflections of the historical currents at work when they were formulated instead of eternal truths, the organizational features of the church come to be seen in terms of adaptation and reaction to the organizational features of other situations rather than divinely established, and precepts and practices are likewise viewed as products of contingent historical circumstances. Given that historical conditions have changed since the time when the doctrines, organization, precepts and practices of the church were founded, it will be natural to expect changes in all of these elements. While conservative theologians consider proposed changes in the church to be deviations, liberal theologians reply that changes are always occurring anyway, and that many details of various elements of religion are due to historical contingency and thus may be appropriately altered without violating the sanctity of the religion. The conservative may respond that the fact that the details of religion may be attributed to contingent historical forces does not prevent God from ordaining these details through the historical forces that accompany

them by a kind of pre-existent harmony, but the liberal will answer that the burden is on the conservative to show that the details in question are taboo. At this point there seems to be a standoff.

Underlying the difference between religious conservatives and liberals is much more than different views on the implications of historical objectivity for the understanding of religion. Today, in fact, many theologians who would be considered liberal have given up on the aim of historical objectivity altogether in favor of an even more relativistic position. But no matter whether the liberal theologian accepts some form of historicism or some more radical form of relativism, the result will be congenial to religious pluralism and the rejection of the doctrine of Christian uniqueness as a myth.

Another vital component of the movement from liberal Protestantism to religious pluralism is romanticism. Romanticism is usually presented as a literary and artistic movement of the first half of the nineteenth century, but the attitudes conveyed by romantic poets, painters and composers had a profound influence on religious and philosophical thought. Although the movement is said to have been supplanted in England by the Victorians, and by classicist tendencies in Germany, many of the attitudes and themes of the Romantics were preserved in Victorian literature, some of which have survived beyond the Victorian period into the twentieth century and continue to this day. The romantics emphasized the importance of feeling and intuition as opposed to theory and calculation, the aesthetic as opposed to the practical or philosophical. While the industrial revolution was drastically altering the landscape of Europe, the romantics glorified nature. They praised spontaneity, uniqueness of character, and individual

liberty, and lamented the dreariness of established social conventions, lack of imagination and psychological repression. These attitudes made them receptive to the occult, the mystical and the exotic.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), a leading figure of the German enlightenment as well as the romantic movement, is considered an early exponent of the "higher criticism" or historicist interpretation of the Bible. He expressed his views on religion in essays and dramatic formats; and the most important of his dramatic works of religion is *Nathan der Weise* (1779). He claimed that the essence of religion lies in virtuous action, that all the religions are good, and that there is no absolutely true religion. The most important leader of the romantic movement in Germany was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), who was interested in Christian Pietist writings and in the mystical works of Paracelsus, Swedenborg and Bruno. He also learned Persian and translated Ḥāfiẓ. His influence reached American romanticism through Emerson (1803-1882), who translated his translations of Ḥāfiẓ from German to English. Another German romantic worth mentioning is Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), who studied Sanskrit, made translations and praised the ancient wisdom of India, before abandoning his Indian studies in favor of devotion to Catholicism.[10]

In England, the Romantic movement was also closely associated with interest in the mystical and exotic. These attitudes may be found in the works of

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[10] See Gerald McNiece, *The Knowledge that Endures: Coleridge, German Philosophy and the Logic of Romantic Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

the poets William Blake (1757-1827), William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) and many others, including Edward Fitzgerald (1809-1883), who produced an engaging translation of the *rubba'iyyāt* of Umar Khayyam. The essayist, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), who has become famous in the Islamic world for his open admiration of Islam and the Prophetﷺ, carried Romanticist themes through the Victorian period, and was another major influence on American romanticism, again through Emerson.[11]

In an address to students of Harvard divinity school in 1838, for which he was denounced afterward by the religiously conservative, Emerson explicitly advanced the doctrine that "the essence of all religion" is "the sentiment of virtue," which he described by stating that "The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul."[12] Like Schleiermacher, Emerson felt that religion was not to be sought in church structures, dogmas and rituals, but in a vital inner force, which reveals itself in all cultures:

> The aggregate of the truths concerning the nature of man and the laws of human life, announced at different times and through many media, is the true *Revelation*, of which every nation has some more or less perfect transcript

[11] Emerson became directly acquainted with Wordsworth, Coleridge and Carlyle in 1832, when he traveled to Europe.

[12] *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode, (New York: Penguin, 1981), 74.

> which attracts, of necessity, all the reverence for what is holy and venerable which exists in society.[13]

Emerson's religious thought was influenced by the historicism of the "higher criticism" as well as by romanticism, and the two influences complemented each other, for the higher critics taught a kind of skepticism with respect to the historical pronouncements of scripture, while the romantics emphasized an interpretation of scripture that focused on inner experience rather than historical claims. Emerson explicitly endorsed liberal Protestantism in one of his early sermons, "Religious Liberalism and Rigidity" delivered May 16, 1830.[14]

Schleiermacher's liberal Protestantism, like Emerson's religious thought, developed as a self-conscious reaction to and endorsement of the prevailing climate of romanticism. Characteristic romantic themes enunciated by Schleiermacher are the emphasis on the inner life, originality and spontaneity, an assimilation of the religious point of view to the aesthetic and an openness to the possibility that religious truth may take exotic forms. Schleiermacher's insistence on the independence of religion from doctrine and morals was also congenial

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[13] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 3 vols., eds., Stephen E Whicher, Robert E. Spiller and Wallace E. Williams (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1964), Vol. 2, 92, cited by Irena S. M. Makarushka, *Religious Imagination and Language in Emerson and Nietzsche* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 73.

[14] Makarushka, 54.

to the Bohemian[15] rejection of social conventions that characterized much of the romantic movement.

In America, romantic literature and its themes have been a powerful cultural force, which may be traced from Emerson to the twentieth century in the beatnik and hippie poets, many of whom have expressed a deep interest in or have converted to Eastern religions. Gary Snyder referred to himself and his fellow explorers of Eastern traditions as *dharma revolutionaries.*[16] What was revolutionary was the complete rejection of social norms regulating dress, sexual behavior, the use of illicit drugs, political attitudes, and the work ethic of conventional American life in the 1950's and early 60's. This *anti-establishment* posture was combined with the additional snub of the claim that religious truth is to be found in the Eastern religions, rather than in the established churches.[17]

The attitudes of the dharma revolutionaries were on more than one count similar to those of the romantic Bohemian artists addressed by

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[15] The term "Bohemian" was used for gypsies who were mistakenly believed to have originated in Bohemia, and in the nineteenth century in Europe and America, it came to be used for artists who rejected or flouted social conventions by libertine sexual behavior and brightly colored clothing thought to resemble the apparel of the gypsies.

[16] Gary Snyder (b. 1930), *Earth Household* (San Francisco: New Directions, 1969), first published in 1957. Another major literary figure of the "beat generation" was Allen Ginsberg, who embraced Tibetan Buddhism.

[17] See Jacob Needleman, *The New Religions* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

Schleiermacher. These common attitudes are conducive to the acceptance of religious pluralism, and may help to explain the appreciative reception John Hick has found for his religious pluralism in the United States.

Religious pluralism is an outgrowth of liberal Protestantism which (1) requires unorthodox interpretations of Christian scripture and dogma to make salvation available by routes other than Christianity, (2) is skeptical toward rational arguments in favor of the superiority of Christian beliefs, (3) appeals to the modern moral principles of tolerance and rejection of prejudice, and (4) emphasizes the elements common to personal religious faith, particularly the inward turning toward the Ultimate, while the outward expressions of faith in religious law, ritual and theological doctrine are considered to be of secondary importance. These four features correspond to those with which liberal Protestantism was earlier characterized.

Religious pluralism is a theological movement grounded in the ethos of political liberalism and emerging directly out of liberal Protestantism. It has drawn fire from conservative Christians and from post-modernist thinkers who have found that at many points their critique of modernist thought applies to religious pluralism. However, the internal weaknesses common to political liberalism and religious pluralism are most prominent when contrasted with Islamic thought, for the liberal separation of religion from social order is founded on the assumption that this separation is consistent with the tenets of all sects, while it is in direct conflict with the ideals of Islam. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is no place for any sort of religious pluralism in Islam. To the contrary, a case can be made for an Islamic form of

religious pluralism free from the flaws of liberalism and reductionism, but first, we had better investigate the claims of liberal religious pluralism by turning to the ideas of its most outspoken contemporary proponent, John Hick.[18]

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[18] The topic of religious pluralism is taken up in almost all ...↳

of Hick's major works, cited individually below. In addition to these, there are the anthologies, *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions,* ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974) and *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness,* ed., John Hick and Paul Knitter (London: SCM Press, 1988). In response to the latter anthology, there is *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions,* Gavin D'Costa, ed., (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990). The topic of religious pluralism has become one of the most widely discussed issues in religious studies. To mention just a couple more of the collections of essays devoted to the topic, there are *Religious Pluralism*, Leroy S. Rouner, ed., (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief,* ed. Ian Hamnett (London: Routledge, 1990) and *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick,* ed. Harold Hewitt, Jr., (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991). Of particular interest to the question of religious pluralism and Islam, see Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ed., *Islam in a World of Diverse Faiths* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), which contains essays by John Hick, Rex Ambler, David Kerr, who present a Christian perspective on the issue, Dan Cohn-Sherbok and Norman Solomon, representing Judaism, and the Muslim intellectuals, Muhammad Arkoun, Hasan Askari, Ahmad Shafaat, and Yaqub Zaki.

1. 4. *John Hick's Religious Pluralism*

The form of religious pluralism advocated by John Hick is multifaceted. One facet of it is a plea for tolerance. Christians are enjoined to establish good relations with the followers of non-Christian faith traditions and abjure arrogance. This may be termed *normative religious pluralism*, that is, the doctrine that it is morally incumbent upon Christians to respect the followers of non-Christian religions. Here, normative religious pluralism is defined as a specifically Christian doctrine. It makes a claim that it is a duty for Christians to behave in a certain way toward others. It is appropriate to define normative religious pluralism in this way, because the doctrine has been developed by Christian thinkers to address problems with the attitudes of Christians. Of course, Christian religious pluralists, such as John Hick, have expressed the hope that the followers of non-Christian religions will also accept a corresponding form of normative religious pluralism.

The second facet of Hick's religious pluralism pertains to salvation. *Soteriological religious pluralism* may be initially defined as the doctrine that non-Christians may attain Christian salvation. In the following section, this aspect of Hick's religious pluralism will be explored more thoroughly, and it will be found that this initial definition requires refinement. Hick considers soteriological religious pluralism to be at least psychologically necessary for normative religious pluralism to be effective. Christians will not be prone to respect the followers of non-Christian faiths if they believe that those persons cannot be saved. There is not much argument in support of this claim in Hick's writings, but even if it

is accepted as intuitively plausible, it does not follow that the same thing must be said with respect to all the religions of the world. According to the teachings of Islam, respect and tolerance are to be shown to all human beings, even those about whom one does not believe they will enter heaven.

John Hick's early writings on religious pluralism focused on normative and soteriological religious pluralism, and he seemed to assume that normative religious pluralism was dependent on soteriological religious pluralism for the followers of all the religions of the world. For many years, however, John Hick has focused attention on another facet of religious pluralism, *epistemological religious pluralism.* This may be defined rather imprecisely as the claim that Christians have no better justification for their faith than the followers of other religions. This definition makes it clear that epistemological religious pluralism is concerned with the problem of the justification of religious beliefs. Of course, Hick does not believe that Christianity is at any disadvantage at all with respect to the other religions on this score, so it would be more accurate to define his epistemological religious pluralism as the claim that the followers of the major world religions are on equal footing as far as the justification of their religious beliefs is concerned, which, Hick argues, is best founded on religious experience. This aspect of Hick's pluralism has drawn the attention of a number of Christian theologians and philosophers of religion, some of whose views will be examined later.

Alethic religious pluralism is the doctrine that religious truth is to be found in religions other than Christianity to no less extent than it is found in Christianity. Of course, a Christian religious pluralist such as Hick holds that this is the case not only with

respect to Christianity, but for all the major religions. Despite the fact that religions make contradictory statements about the Real, about salvation, about what is right and wrong and about history and human nature, the religious pluralists holds that all these claims may be true relative to the world views in which each such claim is embedded. This is one of the areas of discussion to which Hick is most attentive. He explains the relativity of religious truth in terms of what he calls a Kantian-type hypothesis according to which the Real as such is ineffable, and religious truth claims are cognitive responses to this ineffable transcendent reality which differ because of the different ways in which the Real is experienced. Hick explains:

> This Kantian-type hypothesis addresses the problem of the conflicting truth-claims of the different religions by the proposal that they do not in fact conflict because they are claims about different manifestations of the Real to different human faith communities, each operating with its own conceptuality, spiritual practices, form of life, treasury of myths and stories, and historical memories.[19]

Hick's alethic religious pluralism is not very well defined. He certainly does not mean to assert that all

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[19] John Hick, "Religious Pluralism," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion,* Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 612-613.

the religious doctrines of all religions are true, not even relatively, for he explicitly states that various traditional Christian doctrines, especially doctrines pertaining to the incarnation and the exclusive salvation of the Christian faithful, are false, and that the proper reform of Christian belief requires their rejection. On the other hand, Hick does not mean to make the trivial assertion that there are some religious truths to be found in each of the major religious traditions. His claim is that many of the important doctrinal statements of the major traditions are true despite their apparent incompatibility. This will be examined more fully below.

Finally, one may consider a kind of pluralism pertaining to the divine will or command, *deontic religious pluralism*, according to which the fulfillment of the commands of God does not require one to accept the Christian faith. This kind of pluralism is not discussed by Hick, yet it is crucial for a proper understanding of human responsibility in the face of the plurality of the religious traditions of the world. Later it will be argued that Islam affirms a diachronic deontic religious pluralism, that is, that at different periods of time God has commanded humans to follow different religions, but that with the mission of His last Apostle, may the peace and blessing of Allah be with him and with his folk, God commands all humanity to follow the religion of His final revelation.

1. 4. 1. Soteriological Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism is described by Hick as a doctrine of salvation, and is contrasted with two earlier Christian views of the matter, termed by Hick exclusivism and inclusivism. In simplistic terms, the question is who is to be allowed to go to heaven. The

exclusivist answers that it is only those of his own faith who can reach heaven. The Christian evangelist who preaches that there is only one way to be saved, and that the way is to be found exclusively in the Christian tradition, would be characterized by Hick as an exclusivist. Inclusivists would open the doors to heaven a bit wider to allow for the admission of honorary Christians who participate in some non-Christian religious tradition, but who, by Christian standards, could be said to have led sincere lives of moral rectitude, those who were called by Karl Rahner (1904-1984) "anonymous Christians". More radical than inclusivism is Hick's own religious pluralism which would allow just about anyone into heaven, regardless of race, color or creed, provided that the person undergoes a transformation from "self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness" within some religious tradition. Hick is even prepared to allow that communism may provide the route to salvation for some; at least he is not prepared to rule this out on purely doctrinal grounds.

It must not be forgotten that the three views regarding salvation described above are all Christian theological positions. Hick himself describes religious pluralism as "a Christian position" which starts at inclusivism, but accepts certain further conclusions.[20] The problems which generate the debate over religious pluralism are problems about how to understand the Christian doctrine of salvation. According to traditional Christian doctrine, salvation consists in the divine forgiveness of sin, a forgiveness which, with

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[20] John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 34.

respect to the universal human participation in Adam's original sin, is made possible only by Christ's suffering and sacrifice on the cross. Christians have furthermore held that to share in the redemption provided by Christ, one must personally respond by placing one's faith in that redemption, according to Protestants, or by the sacrament of Baptism, in Catholicism.

It is to be observed that the doctrine of salvation in Protestant Christianity is articulated in terms of faith, while in Catholicism the emphasis is on the sacramental, although exceptions are allowed. According to Catholic doctrine, salvation is the proper end of man, the beatific vision of God in heaven. Redemption is the release of man from the bondage of sin and restoration of friendship with God through the suffering and death of Christ as God incarnate. One participates in the redemption through the sacraments, by means of which grace is obtained, and first of all, through Baptism. There are three kinds of Baptism in Catholicism: (a) Baptism by water, administered by pouring water on the head and reciting the words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"; (b) Baptism by desire, considered to obtain in the case of adults who sincerely intend to enter the Catholic Church, but for whom Baptism by water is for some reason impossible; and (c) Baptism by blood, martyrdom,[21]

[21] Just as the Arabic word for martyr, *shahid*, derives from the verb *shahada*, meaning *he bore witness*, the English word *martyr* is derived from the Greek, *martys*, meaning to witness (and not from the Latin *mort*, as erroneously stated by Dr. Shari'ati. See *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and*

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which is bearing witness to Christ through the sacrifice of one's life. It is useful to keep the Catholic doctrine in mind in order to highlight, by way of contrast, some of the features of Hick's position on salvation and redemption.

Hick does not give much consideration to the Catholic doctrine, for he is writing as a Presbyterian minister who is at once a theologian, philosopher and a liberal social activist. His social activism brought him into close contact with the Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Sikhs of Birmingham when, in 1967, he accepted a chair in the Philosophy of Religion at Birmingham University. As a result of his engagement in community relations and his activities to combat racism, he became a part of a religiously pluralistic community, and he could not accept the judgment of traditional Christianity that his non-Christian friends would not be able to achieve salvation. The practical religious pluralism experienced by Hick led him to view Christian theological doctrine as lagging behind the reality he himself was experiencing, but his religious pluralism is not merely an attempt to make room in heaven for his non-Christian friends, for he was led by his reflections on the capacities of the non-Christian to be saved to question the most fundamental teachings of Christianity, and to formulate a new Christian theology consonant with religious pluralism.

In place of the Christian doctrine of salvation, Hick came to a broader, more abstract understanding according to which salvation is simply the human

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Martyrdom in Islam, ed. Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen (Houston: IRIS, 1986), 230, 242).

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transformation that takes place when a person turns away from a life of self-centeredness and turns to a life centered on Ultimate Reality, regardless of whether this ultimate reality is called God, Brahman, nirvana, or the Tao. If this is how salvation is to be understood, there would seem to be little place left for the special role given to Christ and the Incarnation in Christian dogma. Christ is just one vehicle among many by means of which the personal transformation which is the orientation toward the Ultimate may be realized. Hick did not shy away from this conclusion. Indeed, perhaps his most controversial work in Christian theological circles has been the collection of essays he edited under the title, *The Myth of God Incarnate.*[22] But Hick does not really deny the doctrine of the Incarnation, rather he reinterprets it in accordance with "degree Christologies" which hold that a person may be considered to be divine, or an incarnation of Divinity, to the extent that the person lives in accord with the Divine will. To be redeemed in Christ then comes to mean that it is through Christ in his exemplary life that one finds the way to personal transformation from selfishness to a focus on transcendent reality.

Some writers have observed that the aims of the various religions are not the same. There is a difference between the Hindu concept of *moksha* and the Buddhist concept of *nirvana.* Both involve a cessation of the cycle of reincarnation, but in *moksha* there is union with the qualitiless Brahman, while in

[22] John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977). The controversy spawned by this book is described by Hick in the opening essay, "Three Controversies", of his *Problems of Religious Pluralism.*

nirvana there is annihilation of the ego without union with Brahman, whose existence is denied. Both of these views of the final goal differ considerably from the ideas of the afterlife found in the Semitic religions, among which more subtle differences may be found, too. Hick attempts to define a generic sense of salvation as the personal transformation from selfishness to a centering on the Ultimate. But this sort of generic salvation is surely inadequate from the perspectives of the followers of the various religions. The Buddhist is aiming for nirvana, and a mere change in focus from the self to the Ultimate does not achieve this purpose. Furthermore, we can imagine a Christian exclusivist agreeing with Hick that all the religions might provide a means to generic salvation, while maintaining that this is not sufficient to keep non-Christians from damnation.

The problem posed by the multiplicity of religious goals or conceptions of salvation for Hick is not merely that he needs to find some way to reconcile these notions, it is rather that the sort of reconciliation possible here cannot satisfy the aims of Hick's own program. Hick holds that the doctrine that there is no salvation outside the Christian faith is arrogant and promotes an intolerance and disrespect incompatible with the teachings of Jesus[5]. Assuming that Hick is right about this, he needs to show how the specifically Christian idea of salvation is one which can allow for the salvation of non-Christians. This is not achieved by the construction of an amorphous generic notion of salvation to which all may be admitted. In Part Two of this work, on an Islamic approach to the problem of religious pluralism, it is argued that within the Islamic tradition the specifically Islamic concept of salvation is non-exclusive, that is, those who through no fault of

their own are not Muslims, may nevertheless be guided by God to salvation.

1. 4. 2. Epistemological Religious Pluralism

Hick's religious pluralism and his reformulation of Christian theology is influenced by his social activism, on the one hand, but also by his reflections on the rationality of religious belief. The question of the rationality of religious belief is the single most important, most discussed question in the philosophy of religion in the twentieth century. Like many philosophers of religion writing in English, Hick has come to the conclusion that it is religious experience which makes religious belief rational. Hick argues that it is rational for those whose religious experience strongly leads them to do so to believe wholeheartedly in the reality of God. The centrality of the problem of religious diversity for those who would base religious belief on religious experience is clearly expressed in Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion*:

> If there were only one religious tradition, so that all religious experience and belief had the same intentional object, an epistemology of religion could come to rest at this point. But in fact there are a number of different such traditions and families of traditions witnessing to many different personal deities and non-personal ultimates.[23]

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[23] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 233.

Responding to the problem of religious diversity in the context of a discussion of Alvin Plantinga's reformed epistemology, in which religious experience also plays a basic role, William J. Wainwright sees only three options: first, one may deny that any real conflicts occur. This is a popular view, according to which all the religions are really saying the same thing but in different words. Secondly, one may claim that those who hold religious beliefs at odds with one's own are epistemic inferiors, perhaps because their religious capacities have been distorted by sin or other cultural deficiencies. Finally, one may attempt to find relevant differences between the ways in which orthodox and nonorthodox beliefs are produced which could be used to explain the unreliability of nonorthodox belief formation.[24] The plausibility of Wainwright's second and third moves, according to which those who do not share one's religious beliefs are somehow in an epistemologically deprived set of circumstances seems to vary inversely to one's familiarity with other religious traditions. Hick argues this point most forcefully, and the force of his argument is moral as well as epistemological. It is wrong to view others as epistemologically inferior simply because their religious views are opposed to ours. Thus, Hick defends a version of the first move, the denial of ultimate conflict. The possibility that a fourth alternative exists in addition to those proposed by Wainwright will be considered later, when a position on pluralism is developed in the context of

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[24] William J. Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988), 158.

the teachings of Islam, but Hick certainly does not allow for any such fourth alternative.

The epistemological issues relevant to Hick's defense of religious pluralism are so important, that it seems that an extended examination of them would be appropriate. Fortunately, a recent issue of the journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers, *Faith and Philosophy*,[25] was devoted to an exposition of "The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism" by John Hick, and criticisms of Hick's views by five Christian philosophers of religion. So, after some general discussion of mystical experience, I will turn to the views of William P. Alston, to whom Hick directly seeks to respond in his essay. Then I will summarize and comment on the articles mentioned from *Faith and Philosophy*.

1. 4. 2. 1. *Mystical Experience*

Hick is by no means the first to have suggested that all the great religions are somehow expressions of the same truth, despite their surface differences; it is a thesis suggested in the works of Lessing, Schleiermacher, Emerson, Otto and Toynbee, to mention but a few. Among Muslim thinkers it is also possible to find contemporary advocates of religious pluralism prior to Hick, and this was the subject of Frithjof Schuon's first book, *The Transcendental Unity of Religions*.[26] What is exceptional about Hick

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[25] *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 14, No. 3, July 1997.

[26] Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendental Unity of Religions*, revised edition, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975). Schuon's views as defended by Dr. Seyyid Hossein Nasr are examined at length in a later section.

is the thoroughness of his attempt, in the context of Christian theology, to recognize and accommodate radical diversity of belief and even of mystical experience as stemming from an ineffable Reality.

Many of the students of world mysticism have argued that the experiences of the mystics transcend religious and cultural boundaries, and that mystics have the same fundamental types of experiences regardless of their religious differences. Largely due to the work of Steven T. Katz, this view has increasingly come to be rejected.[27] Katz points out that the experiences of the mystics are often highly specific and often reinforce the detailed structures of belief within the traditions which give rise to them. Taxonomies which typify religious experiences across religious boundaries tend to underrate or ignore the importance of the contribution of the concepts and categories provided by a specific religious tradition to the religious experience itself. If Katz is right, the superficial similarities of religious experiences cannot be used to support a doctrine of religious pluralism; indeed, the more important diversities would seem to undermine the pluralist's claim that religious conflicts are not ultimate.

Surprisingly, Hick accepts Katz's view of the ultimate diversity of religious experiences, but nevertheless defends a pluralism which would reconcile all such diversity as having its source in the differences in the ways in which people think about Ultimate Reality. Hick writes:

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[27] See the articles by Katz in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) and *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

> [T]he Real *an sich* is postulated by us as a presupposition, not of the moral life [as in Kant], but of religious experience and the religious life, whilst the gods, as also the mystically known Brahman, Sunyata and so on, are phenomenal manifestations of the Real occurring within the realm of religious experience.[28]

Ultimate Reality is thus an ineffable noumenon to which we are directed in apparently conflicting ways by the religious traditions of the world and the experiences generated within these traditions. This is Hick's "Kantian-type hypothesis."

Recall that pluralism is supposed to function in the reconciliation of differences in beliefs prompted by religious experiences in such a way that the entitlement to believe on the basis of the experience is preserved by analogy to the manner in which sense experience warrants perceptual belief. Faced with conflicting perceptual reports made by epistemic peers, one may preserve the degree of warrant provided by experience for one's belief only if the conflicting reports is found to be ultimately reconcilable with one's own, or if good reasons can be found for thinking that the conflicting reports are mistaken. Given the general skepticism about rational theology among liberal Protestants, it should come as no surprise that Hick seeks the route of reconciliation. The reconciliation should show how, despite

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[28] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale, 1989), 243.

differences in categories and concepts, some common information is conveyed in the apparently conflicting reports. Thus, in case of religious conflict, if one person asserts that his spiritual perceptions convey to him the information that God is the greatest while another person claims that he spiritually perceives that Brahman is the greatest, one might attempt a reconciliation by showing that Brahman is the name Hindus use for God. Hick is aware, however, that the matter is not as simple as this. The concepts of Brahman and God are really different, and must be understood in terms of the vastly different theological world views of the Vedas and the Semitic scriptures. Despite such differences, Hick asserts that claims made about God and Brahman may ultimately point to the same ineffable reality. The admission of the difference in the concepts deprives us, however, of the grounds for asserting ultimate agreement, and without such grounds, the diversity of religious beliefs and experiences undermines the attempt to find rational warrant for belief in religious experience.

Hick uses the example of those who cannot see describing an elephant (one feels its trunk and claims it is like a snake, another feels its leg and says the animal must be like a tree, etc.) from Maulavī Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī[29] claiming that we are in the position of the blind men whose descriptions of the elephant of ultimate reality are given the limited forms of the various religions. Against this, it has been argued that if we were really in the position of one of the blind men and were faced with such a variety of reports, we should conclude not that all of the reports describe the

[29] From the *Mathnavi*, Book III, line 1259 ff..

same elephant, but that all of the reports are wrong.[30] It should be noted that Rūmī's own use of the example was to point out how limited are our abilities to know the divine, and that one should attempt to understand God by means of a spiritual light which cannot be provided by the normal modes of understanding. To extend the allegory to differences in religious experience, it would seem that what is needed is some guidance beyond that which is to be found by reliance upon one's own religious experiences, and that religious experiences by themselves cannot serve as a reliable basis for religious belief. In the Islamic tradition, the wayfarer is not led by religious experience, but by gnosis (*ma'rifah*).

1. 4. 2. 2. *Alston on the Epistemic Value of Religious Experience*

This conclusion (that religious experiences by themselves cannot serve as a reliable basis for religious belief) is disputed by William P. Alston.[31] Alston holds that religious experience *can* support religious beliefs analogously to the manner in which sensory experience supports beliefs about the physical world, despite the problem of the diversity of religious faiths. The difference between the situation of the

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[30] Peter Byrne, "John Hick's Philosophy of World Religions," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35, no. 4, (1982), 297, cited in Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach and David Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 227. See Hick's response to Byrne in *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 102-107.

[31] In his *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 255-285.

blind men and the elephant and that of religious diversity is that in the case of the elephant we can easily imagine ways in which the blind men could revise their beliefs and arrive at a consensus. They merely need to explore further. Alston holds that since there is no such means for resolving religious differences, the cases are not analogous, and in the absence of such means, it is rational to believe in accordance with the experience available, despite the conflicting reports of the experiences of others.

Alston also makes four points worth mentioning here with regard to religious pluralism.

First, like Hick, Alston initially exhibits little faith in the ability of rational argument to settle the differences. The idea that the sort of further exploration by means of which consensus is to be achieved is a process of inquiry in which reasons are given, weighed and examined is not considered. This is especially odd, since Alston scolds other philosophers for not paying sufficient heed to the epistemology of their own discipline. In philosophy, it is not reasonable to simply adopt a metaphysical stance because it is dominant in one's culture, or because one's teachers propounded it, or because it reflects the way one happens to see the world. Arguments are required, and even if decisive arguments are not to be had, this is no excuse to give up looking for reasons altogether. As we shall see, in response to Hick, Alston does indicate that rational argument may be needed to evaluate conflicting claims made on the basis of religious experience.

Second, Alston admits that even according to his own assumptions, the existence of conflicting religious experiences indeed does undermine the warrant provided by experience for religious belief to some extent. He thinks that the damage is not serious

enough to threaten the rationality of religious belief, but it is damage.

Third, Alston does not accept Hick's pluralism because he holds that this would require a revision of Christian doctrine while his project is to defend the rationality of actual Christian belief.

> [S]ince I take my task to be the analysis and evaluation of real life religious doxastic practices, not the reform, or degradation, thereof, I will not avail myself of Hick's way out.[32]

Alston claims that religious believers normally understand their faith realistically, rather than as a culturally conditioned expression of something shared in common by such diverse faiths as Judaism and Buddhism.

Fourth, the religious pluralist's position seems to be incompatible with the idea of revelation found in the Abrahamic religions. According to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, God truly reveals Himself to man. If He were to provide us with accounts of Himself that are couched in terms of one of the many ways in which He could appear to us, rather than in terms of what He is and does, He revelations would be "misleading at best and deceptive at worst".[33]

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[32] *Ibid.*, 266.
[33] *Ibid.*

1. 4. 2. 3. *The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism*

It is customary for a book of critical essays to be published to honor the work of an eminent philosopher, often on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday. It is not uncommon for this sort of book, called a *Festschrift*, to contain scathing criticism of the philosopher honored, who is sometimes given the opportunity to respond to his critics in a concluding essay included in the volume. The *Festschrift* published in honor of the work of William P. Alston[34] contains essays by many prominent philosophers of religion, including Alvin Plantinga, Peter van Inwagen and George Mavrodes, each of whom defends a version of Christian exclusivism. In his "The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism," John Hick attacks the views of Alston, Plantinga, van Inwagen and Mavrodes from the ground of his own religious pluralism. His challenges and the reponses of the four philosophers mentioned are summarized and criticized in what follows.

1. 4. 2. 3. 1. Hick versus Alston

Hick and Alston agree on the importance of religious experience for the justification of religious belief. They disagree on the significance of conflict in the area of religious experience. Hick holds that since religious experience is to be found in all the major religious traditions, religious experience justifies beliefs peculiar to each of these traditions. Hence

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[34] Thomas D. Senor, ed., *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith: Essays in Honor of William P. Alston* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

there is justification for the acceptance of beliefs that contradict one another. Contradictory claims cannot both be true, however, so Hick holds that the contradictions occur only at a level in which claims made are merely relatively true. Alston, on the other hand, claims that religious experience justifies true beliefs in the case of Christianity, but false beliefs in the case of other religions. Hick demands some reason why Christianity should be the sole exception to the general phenomena in which religious experiences support false beliefs. He asks why religious experience should be trusted in the context of Christianity, when it should be considered an unreliable form of justification, since it supports what Alston considers to be the false beliefs of other creeds.

Hick challenges Alston. If, as they agree, the best justification for religious beliefs is to be found in religious experience, then the justification of religious beliefs by religious experience must be reliable if it is to be at all successful. If religious experience is generally reliable, it should be considered to provide reason for accepting whatever truths it supports, not merely those of the Christian tradition. Religious experience seems to support conflicting claims, so, these conflicts need to be relativised or explained away along the lines suggested by the religious pluralist.

Alston's reply reveals the sloppy logic of Hick's argument. Alston protests that Hick seems to assume that most of the beliefs supported by religious experience in each of the world religious systems contradict most of the beliefs in the other systems. Alston comments that this is far from obvious, and that since there is no way to count beliefs, it is impossible to make such an assertion precise. Nevertheless, Alston remarks that it is his impression

that there is more agreement than conflict. On Alston's view, then, religious experience may be generally reliable even if only one religion is true, because even the false religions contain many religious truths, some of which are common to all of them, and religious experience serves mostly to support such religious truths. Furthermore, Alston admits that religious beliefs have sources other than religious experience, including revelation, tradition and natural theology, and he suggests that many differences among the world religions may be due to the different ways in which these are understood, rather than arising from conflicts among religious experiences.

Alston continues that even if most beliefs based on religious experience were false, this would not undermine the central claim of his book:[35] "that its seeming to one that some Ultimate Reality (UR) is presenting itself to one's experience as o makes it *prima facie* justified that UR is o."[36]

Prima facie justification is explained in detail below, but after the statement just quoted, Alston adds a "final note" to the effect that he believes that there are good reasons aside from religious experience to prefer the Christian belief-system to its rivals, although he declines to present them, and, to my knowledge, has not presented them anywhere. Other than religious experience, the only sources admitted by Alston for religious beliefs are revelation, tradition

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[35] William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[36] William P. Alston, "Response to Hick," *Faith and Philosophy,* 14/3, 287.

and natural theology. Given that there can be no justification of Christianity in terms of revelation and tradition that could not be matched by other religions, it would seem that some appeal would need to be made to natural theology, while Christian theologians have generally admitted that natural theology, assuming that it can successfully prove the existence of God and various facts about the divine attributes, cannot establish the truth of Christianity. In the final pages of *Perceiving God*, Alston speaks of a cumulative case argument that pulls together mutually reinforcing considerations about the Christian life, revelation, tradition, natural theology and personal religious experience, but the conclusion Alston hopes to defend by this method is merely that a reflective Christian woman could be justified "to suppose that there is a being of the sort she takes herself to be aware of in her Christian life."[37] However, the challenge raised for Alston by Hick is much more difficult. Reasons must be found for the acceptance of Christian teachings precisely where they conflict with non-Christian teachings found in other religions. Alston gives us little clue about how this could be done, except for the remark (cited by Hick) that one "may argue that historical evidence gives much stronger support to the claims of Christianity than to those of its theistic rivals—Judaism and Islam."[38] While historical work might help to adjudicate the differences between the historical claims made by the religions, it is difficult to see how any sort of historical findings could help with doctrinal

[37] William P. Alston, *Perceiving God*, 306.
[38] William P. Alston, *Perceiving God*, 270.

differences, such as a defense of the most salient of Christian doctrines, the trinity and the incarnation. Indeed, despite his impressive philosophical acumen, Alston really has nothing to allay suspicions that Christianity cannot adequately defend its superiority to the other religions of the world on the epistemic grounds he has surveyed.

Alston says that even if there are no sufficient reasons independent of religious experience to prefer one religion to others, religious experience could still provide prima facie justification for the superiority of Christianity, "even if much or most of this justification is overridden."[39] Prima facie justification is a rather paltry product of contemporary Western epistemology; even if Alston is judged to have successfully defended his thesis that religious experiences may provide prima facie (but mostly overridden) justification for the truth of a Christian creed, this does not provide an answer to the sort of problem raised by Hick. Overridden prima facie justification does not make it rational to believe. What Hick is looking for is some reason in religious experience to support religious beliefs, and since religious experience as a global phenomenon does not seem to support one religion more than another, he holds that it must be taken to support all or none. Alston offers no way out of this predicament except to make vague suggestions that other reasons might be given aside from religious experience, and that a persons own religious experiences may provide prima facie justification for exclusivist beliefs despite the

[39] William P. Alston, "Response to Hick," 288.

fact that the same sort of justification could lead others to contrary conclusions.

In order to understand the problems with Alston's claims about the justificatory role of religious experience, more needs to be said about prima facie justification. Beliefs formed on the basis of experience are subject to error, and if one becomes aware of conditions which would lead to error in the formation of perceptual belief, the justification of that belief may be defeated. For this reason experience is said to provide perceptual beliefs only with *prima facie* justification. The simple fact that one is the subject of a sensory experience justifies one in forming beliefs which are descriptive of the content of the experience, unless one has some reason to believe that the experience is misleading, e.g. because one has taken drugs which impair perceptual abilities.

Alston writes of prima facie justification:

> To be prima facie justified in believing that p by virtue of the satisfaction of conditions, C, is to be so situated that one will be unqualifiedly justified in that belief provided there are no sufficient "overriders", that is, no sufficient considerations to the contrary. These considerations might be reasons for believing that not-p ("rebutters"), or they might be reasons for supposing that C fails to provide adequate justification in this case ("underminers"). Unqualified justification is simply justification

> without any such qualifications attached: justification no matter what else.[40]

Unfortunately, this explanation sounds a bit awkward, because it is claimed that prima facie justification occurs when there is *unqualified* justification if certain conditions are met, and unqualified justification is justification without need for those conditions. It would have been better to state that one has prima facie justification for believing something just in case one is justified in the absence of overriders.

A similar definition of prima facie justification is given by John Pollock in his *Knowledge and Justification*:

> "P is prima facie justified for S" means "It is necessarily true that if S believes (or were to believe) that P, and S has no reason for thinking that it is false that P, then S is (or would be) justified in believing that P."[41]

Pollock's definition differs from Alston's in that he does not mention underminers, but otherwise the structure is basically the same. In order to make this structure clearer, it will be helpful to introduce the following abbreviations:

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[40] William P. Alston, *Perceiving God,* 72.

[41] John L. Pollock, *Knowledge and Justification* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 30.

Iexp: x interprets experience e as indicating that p.

Jxp: x is justified in believing that p. As Alston uses this term, it means that x is in an epistemically strong position with regard to p, that is, that x has adequate grounds for believing p, where these grounds may be other beliefs (in case of mediate justification), or an experience, memory, intuition of self-evidence, etc. (in case of immediate justification).

Pexp: experience e provides subject x with prima facie justification for believing that p.

A natural way to formalize the Pollock-Alston notion of prima facie justification would be as follows:

Pexp $=_{df.}$ (*Iexp* & x does not have sufficient overriding considerations against believing that p)$\rightarrow$*Jxp*.

To see how this definition works, consider the following question: Can one fail to have adequate grounds for believing p even when one does not have sufficient overriding considerations against this belief? If the answer to this question is no then the definiens becomes an analytic truth. Every experience would provide prima facie justification for any belief. To the contrary, the Pollock-Alston definition allows that one can lack adequate grounds for believing p even when one does not have sufficiently strong reason not to believe. To claim that e provides x with prima facie justification for believing that p is, thus, to claim that in the absence of overriding considerations, e has enough epistemic force or weight to bring about

justification, and justification is to be understood in a fairly objective or *externalist* way, indicating that the grounds for the belief make it probable that the belief is true.

Wild speculation that *q* on the basis of *e* is not a case of prima facie justification because *e* would not provide *x* with sufficient grounds for believing *q* even if there were no overriders in the possession of *x*. Care must be taken about the circumstances under which it may be said that there are no overriders in the possession of *x*. When *x* believes *q* on the basis of *e* because of wild speculation, there most certainly must be overriders, more specifically, there must be underminers, reasons for supposing that *e* fails to provide sufficient support for *q*, but *x* may well be ignorant of these underminers, that is, he may falsely think that his wild speculation is an instance of impeccable logical reasoning.

Suppose Zayd, who sells fabric in a shop where new electric lighting has been recently installed, picks up a bolt which appears to him to be green. According to Alston and Pollock, this would be a case in which Zayd has prima facie justification for his belief that the bolt is green, but in which justification is defeated by knowledge that the new lighting makes it difficult to judge color accurately. The experience provides Zayd with prima facie justification for his belief that the cloth is green, because being appeared to greenly makes it highly probable that one is in the presence of something green, although Zayd is not justified in his belief, all things considered, because he knows that blue cloth often appears green under the new lights. If Zayd did not know about the problem with the lighting, he would not be in possession of any overriders and would be justified in his belief that the cloth is green.

To see that Pollock's version of the definition of prima facie justification is wrong, suppose that despite his knowledge of the problem with the lighting, Zayd obstinately interprets his experience as an indication that the fabric really is green. He does not possess any rebutters, for he does not have sufficient reason to think that it is not green, since it may be blue or green. In this scenario, the definiens of Pollock's definition for prima facie justification is false even though it is a clear case of prima facie justification in which ultimate justification is defeated. The case described is one of prima facie justification because Zayd would be justified in his belief were it not for the fact that he knows that the lighting alters color perception.

If we then turn to Alston's definition, we find that Zayd does have undermining considerations, his knowledge of the problem with the lighting, on the basis of which his obstinate belief will be said to lack ultimate justification. The problem with Alston's version of the definition is that it becomes difficult to find a case in which an experience fails to provide prima facie justification for any belief. How could *x* lack sufficient grounds for believing *p* when there are no considerations in his possession to undermine the belief, when *x* has no reasons for supposing belief that *p* to have inadequate grounds? One would have to allow that objectively *x* lacks sufficient grounds for believing *p* on the basis of *e*, although subjectively *x* is not aware of any reasons for supposing his belief to have inadequate grounds, as in the case of the wild speculation. This would mean that an unjustified belief with a lack of prima facie justification requires ignorance of overriders, in particular, ignorance of the fact that the grounds for the belief are inadequate. So, if a definition of prima facie justification with the structure of those suggested by Alston and Pollock is

accepted, there will be no beliefs that are not prima facie justified for a sufficiently well informed person.

In order to evaluate the claim that Alston refers to as the main thesis of *Perceiving God*, that religious experience provides prima facie justification for religious belief, we need to consider whether religious belief based on religious experience is more like a case of wild speculation, or more like the case of Zayd in the fabric store. Hick's epistemological challenge of religious pluralism may be read as an argument that an exclusivist must consider religious belief based on religious experience to be more like wild speculation. The fact that many religious beliefs based on religious experience are false, according to the exclusivist, provides the believer with a potential overrider. If the believer knows of the overrider, he is not ultimately justified. If he does, however, have prima facie justification, then ignorance of the overrider would make him justified, just as Zayd's ignorance of the problem with the lighting would made him justified in believing the fabric is green, because in most cases in which cloth seems green, it really is green. But if most cases of religious belief based on religious experience are false, ignorance of this is not enough to secure justification, and thus, the believer lacks even prima facie justification for his belief based on religious experience.

Another argument against Alston's central thesis may be constructed by looking at prima facie justification in a different way. Two sorts of circumstances need to be distinguished: circumstances in which one's prima facie justification for a belief is overridden, and circumstances in which experiences cannot provide even a prima facie justification for a belief.

An example of defeated prima facie justification is provided by Alston. If I am confronted by a complex arrangement of mirrors, it may seem to me as if I am standing before an oak, although I am not justified in this belief, regardless of whether the belief is true. In normal circumstances, when I seem to be standing before an oak, I am justified in believing that things are as they seem to be.

Suppose I am standing before an oak, and I form the following three beliefs:

(1) that the oak is more than five hundred miles from Texas,

(2) that most of the molecules in the object before me are carbon compounds, and

(3) that there are exactly one thousand leaves on the tree in front of me.

Although I may be justified in holding the first two beliefs, and although these two beliefs are based, in part at least, on my experience, the experience does not provide prima facie justification for the beliefs. The content of the first two beliefs involves information to which the experience of standing before an oak is not evidentially relevant. I am not justified in holding the third belief on the basis of merely standing before the tree, because normally we cannot ascertain the exact number of leaves on a tree simply by looking.

These considerations suggest the following definition of prima facie justification:

Pexp = $_{df.}$ (i) *Iexp*, and
(ii) the belief cannot have a high degree of theory dependency, or otherwise contain information to which the experience is not evidentially relevant;

(iii) under normal circumstances, the subject should not have reason to doubt that the experience is genuine and supports the belief based on the experience.

Conditions (ii) and (iii) for prima facie justification will be called *relevancy* and *normalcy.*

Alston calls religious beliefs about how God is related to a subject M-beliefs. To show that M-beliefs formed on the basis of religious experience do not acquire prima facie justification simply in virtue of the experience, it suffices to show that M-beliefs violate one or the other of the two major conditions for prima facie justification formulated above: relevancy and normalcy.

First, M-beliefs have a high degree of theory dependency. They are not simply reports which describe the content of an experience, at least not in most cases. In the common cases of religious experience with which Alston and Hick are concerned, experiences which are not unusual among the most devout and pious, the experience of God is not dramatic. The feeling which the subject interprets as indicating God's love might easily be interpreted as the subject's love for God. The experience interpreted as God's willing that one dedicate one's life to the poor might also be interpreted as the desire of the subject to please God by leading a life of service. Nebulous experiences which are interpreted in terms of M-beliefs lack phenomenological content rich enough to match the theoretical content of the M-beliefs, and thus violate the relevancy condition.

Of course, there are also dramatic religious experiences, such as those of the prophets, peace be with them, and mystics such as Ruzbihan Baqlī,[42] in which the content of the experience does not require the subject to read meaning into it. Given the fact that the experience was not an illusion, the M-belief might require no further justification in such cases. The problem here is that the more dramatic one's religious experience, the more abnormal it is, and thus the more reason one has for doubting whether it is genuine. These doubts may be overcome by further considerations, but the experience alone is not sufficient to provide prima facie justification.

The nature of religious experience places the subject in a dilemma with respect to the prima facie justification of M-beliefs. All religious experiences may be placed on a spectrum which at one end will indicate the most nebulous experiences and at the other, the most vivid. The closer an experience is to the nebulous end of the spectrum, the weaker is the relation of evidential relevance between the experience and the M-belief. The closer an experience is to the vivid end of the spectrum, the more unusual the experience is, and the more reason there is to wonder whether the experience was not really illusory. No matter where on the spectrum of religious experience a particular incident falls, it will fail to provide prima facie justification for an M-belief because the M-belief will outstrip the religious content of the experience, or because there will be good reason to think the experience may be illusory, or both.

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[42] See Ruzbihan Baqli, *The Unveiling of Secrets*, tr., Carl W. Ernst (Chapel Hill: Parvardigar Press, 1997).

So, it appears that Alston cannot escape Hick's challenge by retreating to the position that his thesis is merely that religious experience provides prima facie justification for religious belief. Religious experience may well play a role in the justification of certain religious beliefs, but the role is not that of providing for prima facie justification.

Whatever role religious experience plays in the justification of religious beliefs, Hick's challenge remains without an adequate answer from Alston. In effect, Hick asks whether the consideration of the two facts (1) that followers of different religions have experiences that seem to corroborate their own religious beliefs, and (2) that the beliefs thus corroborated often conflict with one another, does not undermine the grounds provided by religious experience to support the claims of any particular creed. This same challenge is next posed by Hick to Alvin Plantinga, whose views of religious experience and the justification of religious belief are somewhat similar to Alston's.

1. 4. 2. 3. 2. Hick versus Plantinga

Plantinga's contribution to Alston's *Festschrift* is "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism". In this essay, Plantinga is primarily concerned to refute normative religious pluralism, the claim that it is wrong for Christians to claim that their religious beliefs are right and that the conflicting claims made by the followers of other religions are false. Plantinga argues that there is nothing arrogant, imperialistic, irrational, unjustified, arbitrary, oppressive or dishonest in Christian exclusivism, provided that the Christian exclusivist is fully aware of other religions

and is aware that there is much in them that seems to be genuine piety and devoutness.

Hick responds that while the Christian exclusivism of Plantinga does not reflect any moral failure, Christian exclusivism through the centuries has often taken reprehensible forms by expressing itself "in the persecution and murder of Jews, in violent crusades against Muslims, in the validation of European imperialism, and in the often ignorant denigration of other religions."[13] Plantinga's point is that these excesses should not be seen as a logical consequence of exclusivism, and Hick's point is that even if there is no logical relation between them, exclusivism has historically been used as an excuse for the propagation of evil.

Hick then claims that by focusing on what I have called *normative religious pluralism*, Plantinga has missed the central issue of religious pluralism, which he states to be its epistemological challenge. Hick then quotes himself for a succinct version of the challenge:

> Having thus noted that Ptolemaic [i.e. exclusivist] theologies tend to posit their centers on the basis of the accidents of geography, one is likely to see one's own Ptolemaic [exclusivist] conviction in a new light. Can we be so entirely confident that to have been born in our particular part of the world carries with it the privilege of knowing

[43] John Hick, "The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism", 280.

> the full religious truth, whereas to have been born elsewhere involves the likelihood of having only partial and inferior truth?[44]

Plantinga responds that the same argument could be made about religious pluralism. Whether or not one is a religious pluralist depends upon accidents of birth no less than whether or not one is a Christian. While this response seems clever, it is not entirely appropriate. Hick argues that since religious affiliation is an accident of birth, a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' is appropriate with regard to beliefs instilled from the surrounding culture. Religious pluralism is not the sort of thing in which one is indoctrinated as a child, and in this it differs from Christianity. Even if a person's beliefs with regard to religious pluralism and Christianity were equally determined by birth, this would not damage Hick's argument for a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'. Since our beliefs are often the product of unconscious imitation of what abounds in our culture, rather than careful reasoning, it is wise to take a critical stance toward our own beliefs. Hick believes that he has good reasons for his pluralism, while he thinks that his Christianity rests on culturally dependent religious experiences. Furthermore, Plantinga claims that some religious beliefs are properly basic, while Hick makes no such claim on behalf of religious pluralism.

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[44] *Ibid.*, 281, from John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1982), 37-38. The brackets are Hick's.

The argument from the accidents of birth, however, by no means establishes the truth of any sort of religious pluralism. Reflection on the tendency to blind imitation is something Muslim thinkers have long warned against. Blind imitation, or *taqlīd* is even explicitly forbidden in Shī'ī jurisprudence with regard to the fundamental principles of religion. Instead of leading to a form of religious pluralism, reflection on the influence of the accidents of birth on our beliefs should prompt us to dig deeper, to seek an honest confrontation with conflicting truth claims and a well reasoned evaluation of them.

The reply written by Plantinga to Hick in *Faith and Philosophy* is amusing. To Hick's remark that Plantinga has missed the central point of religious pluralism, Plantinga replies that he thought that the central point of religious pluralism was that there is something either morally or epistemically wrong with Christian exclusivism. So, Plantinga wrote a letter to Hick asking him what exactly he takes to be the central point. Hick responded that the central point is that since the epistemological and moral support that can be mustered for each of the major religions is equal, it is arbitrary to believe in one of them while denying the others. Plantinga responds that he does not accept the claim that the various religions are equally well grounded. He is willing to accept the fact that the views of non-Christians seem just as true to them as his own views seem to him, and are accompanied by the same degree of psychological certainty. He is even willing to grant that the non-Christians may be *justified* in their beliefs, and that they violate no epistemic duties by believing as they do. Furthermore, he is willing to suppose that no argument of which he knows would convince the non-Christians that they were wrong and that he is right.

Nevertheless, Plantinga thinks that not only are his Christian views true and those incompatible with them false, thus rejecting alethic religious pluralism, but that his views are also superior from an epistemic point of view, that the grounds for believing in Christianity are stronger than those for believing in the other religions. There is nothing arbitrary about thinking this way, Plantinga observes, and so, Hick's central point seems to miss the mark of refuting exclusivism.

Hick suggests that religious experience is to be found in all the major religions, and thus can provide no better reason for the affirmation of one than another. Plantinga responds that the Christian exclusivist may have various reasons for supposing that his own epistemic position is superior to that of non-Christians: that he has been favored by the "Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit", or that he believes on the basis of something like Calvin's *sensus divinitas*, or that he has been converted by divine grace. If any of these beliefs are true, then the Christian exclusivist is in a superior epistemic position to those who deny particularly Christian beliefs. Hick has not provided any reason for thinking that such beliefs are not true, and the mere fact that there are contrary beliefs in other religious traditions all of which seem to be confirmed by religious experience does not show that all these religious experiences are epistemic equals.

Plantinga is willing to admit that as far as the internal marks of certainty accompanying religious experience and intuition, Christian and non-Christian beliefs may be epistemically equals, but he holds that there are other epistemic properties of Christian intuitions and experiences that make them

epistemically superior to those of non-Christians, such as being instilled by the Holy Spirit.

Plantinga draws an analogy with moral intuitions. The fact that different people often have different moral intuitions does not mean that all moral intuitions are equal. Someone might have inferior moral intuitions as a result of improper training as a child, or because he is blinded by worldly desires, or because of a simple lack of moral insight or wisdom. The fact that the moral views of the sage and the pervert are both based on intuitions does not imply that their views are equal, or that moral truth must be sought in some transcendent reality equally imperfectly expressed in the moral views of the sage and pervert.

Plantinga also uses the moral analogy to answer Hick's argument about the accidents of birth. Today, we all believe that racism is a great evil, but if we had been born in another age in a culture where racial bias were the norm, we probably would not have the same intuitions about racism that we in fact do. Perhaps this provides us with reason for adopting a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' about our moral intuitions about racism, but it does not show that these intuitions are no better than what they would have been had we been raised by slave traders. If, after "careful, prayerful thought and consideration" it still seems to us that racism is evil, this view is not arbitrary simply because it depends on accidents of birth.

Plantinga is more successful than Alston in responding to Hick's epistemological challenge of religious pluralism. The weakness in Alston's reply stems from his preoccupation with prima facie justification. If the rationality of religious belief were due entirely to the prima facie justification accorded to religious beliefs by religious experiences, then the fact

that religious experience supports conflicting religious views would seem to undermine that justification. Alston is thus forced to back off with the admission that reasons other than religious experience must be considered in order to justify exclusivist Christian belief. Plantinga, on the other hand, does not limit the role of religious experience to that of providing prima facie justification. He holds that religious experiences may have epistemic properties rendering some superior to others, such as being the product of divine grace. Still, there seems to be something missing. The problem is not merely that Muslim, Christian and Jew may all claim that their experiences that seem to support their conflicting beliefs are blessings from the mercy of God, but that the similarity of these claims calls for further epistemological evaluation. Plantinga comes close to an appreciation of this in his discussion of morality and "careful, prayerful thought and consideration". But he does not consider the role reason should play in this thought and consideration, or whether the absence of well reasoned thought and consideration would undermine justification. If reasoning is needed for the justification of religious beliefs, then Plantinga's claim that they are properly basic would be left in a similar condition to Alston's claim that religious experience provides them with prima facie justification.

Hick's epistemological challenge is important, because it raises deep philosophical questions about the nature of rational belief. Hick, Alston and Plantinga all focus on the contribution of religious experience to the rationality of religious belief. Hick's astute observation into the problem is that since religious experiences seem to support conflicting religious beliefs, the existence of religious experience alone is not sufficient to justify one of these beliefs to

the exclusion of its rivals. But Hick does not allow that anything else could count in the evaluation but elements equally present in all the major traditions; so, he holds that they are equally imperfect responses to the Ultimate Reality. Alston and Plantinga, on the other hand, are both forced to admit that the justification of religious belief must appeal to something more than the mere occurrence of religious experiences, but neither of them provides very much in the way of elaboration.

1. 4. 2. 3. 3. Hick versus van Inwagen

In his contribution to Alston's *Festschrift*, Peter van Inwagen defends the exclusivist thesis that the Christian Church is the one and only instrument of salvation. The focus here is on soteriological religious pluralism rather than epistemic religious pluralism. He responds to the accident of birth argument with an analogy, somewhat similar to Plantinga's response, except that Plantinga used the example of morality while van Inwagen turns to politics. The fact that my political views would probably be much different if I had been brought up in a different era does not show that my actual political views are not clearly and markedly superior than they would have been. In response to this, Hick introduces another argument based on divine mercy. Hick writes:

> One can accept that a loving God leaves humans free to devise their own political systems, but can one suppose that the Heavenly Father, who loves all human beings with an equal and unlimited love, has ordained that only those who have the good fortune to be

> born in certain parts of the world shall have the opportunity of salvation?[45]

Van Inwagen pleads ignorance on this matter, claiming that what provision God has made for those who do not know the Christian message is "God's business and not ours." Hick responds that this is a standard evasion of the problem. If van Inwagen really is willing to admit his ignorance about God's plan for the non-Christians, why does he claim that the Church is God's sole instrument of salvation? Ignorance about God's plan for the non-Christians would seem to imply ignorance about whether God has not ordained the non-Christian religions to be instruments of salvation.

Van Inwagen's response is subtle. At first glance it would seem that his admission of ignorance about God's plan for the non-Christians was not meant to be taken as seriously as Hick took it to be. But van Inwagen does not claim that that there is no salvation outside the Church, rather, he holds that there are no divinely ordained instruments of salvation outside the Church, and he asserts that it is this latter belief, and not the former, that is essential to Christianity: "I don't see how I could coherently give up this belief other than by ceasing to be a Christian."[46] So, while van Inwagen admits that he does not know what God plans to do with non-Christians, he does claim to know (or at least to believe truly) "that there are no divinely ordained instruments of salvation (as opposed

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[45] *Ibid.*, 282.

[46] Peter van Inwagen, "A Reply to Professor Hick" *Faith and Philosophy,* 14/3, 300.

to things that arise in the world by chance and which God may use as instruments in securing the salvation of various individuals or classes of people) outside the Church".[47]

The view suggested by van Inwagen's remarks is similar to the view to be defended in Part Two of this work in that it is compatible with the acceptance of *soteriological pluralism* and the denial of *deontic pluralism*. Van Inwagen's position is consistent with *soteriological pluralism* for he does not make the traditional Christian claim that outside the Church there is no salvation; in fact, if this is taken to imply the damnation of all non-Christians, he explicitly rejects it. On the other hand, van Inwagen stops short of an explicit endorsement of soteriological pluralism, although he expresses a tentative belief that God may save Muslims and Buddhists through the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts.[48] What van Inwagen denies is *deontic pluralism*, the view that there is more than one religion divinely ordained by God. According to van Inwagen, God's commandment is for all humanity to accept Christianity, and He has ordained the Christian Church for the purpose of human salvation. This does not imply that no other path can lead to salvation. The claim is merely that the other paths are not included in the divine covenant.

Hick seems to confuse soteriological pluralism with deontic pluralism, and for this reason accuses van Inwagen of contradicting himself when he claims to know that the Church is the sole divinely ordained

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[47] *Ibid.*
[48] *Ibid.*, 301-302, fn. 8.

instrument of salvation, yet admit ignorance about the ultimate fate of non-Christians.

The reason given by van Inwagen, however, for his deontic exclusivism is not based on revelation or scripture, but on the traditions of the Church. He claims that the belief is "mere Christianity" and has been endorsed by Paul, the Primitive Church, the Apostolic Fathers, the scholastics, Luther, Calvin, Cranmer, Trent, Wesley and Newman. The same sources, however, could be cited in support of the soteriological exclusivism in which van Inwagen does not believe. In Part Two it will be argued that an Islamic deontic exclusivism may be supported by reference to the Qur'ān and *aḥādith* which is also consistent with soteriological pluralism.

1. 4. 2. 3. 4. Hick versus Mavrodes

In his contribution to the Alston *Festschrift*, George I. Mavrodes accuses Hick of polytheism. Mavrodes does not respond directly to the epistemological challenge of religious pluralism, but directs his criticism to Hick's "Kantian hypothesis" that all the religions are human responses to an ineffable ultimate reality. If the various gods of the world religions and nontheistic ultimates are all equally manifestations of the Real, then, Mavrodes claims, it would seem that Hick is advocating a kind of polytheism, for all these gods would seem to have an equal right to be identified with the ultimate, and thus to be real gods. But the relation between the objects of worship and meditation of the various religions and the Real is somewhat obscure in Hick's writings. Mavrodes offers two models on which this could be explained. According to the *disguise model*, the Real reveals itself in various guises to the

followers of the world religions. According to the *construct model*, the followers of the world religion all experience the Real, but they describe It in different ways appropriate to their own cultural traditions.

Hick responds by denying that he is a polytheist, and also by pointing out inadequacies in both models suggested by Mavrodes. Hick admits that it may turn out that he is a poly-something, but not a polytheist, because he holds that theistic as well as non-theistic responses to the ultimate are equally valid. In Hick's defense, it should also be noted that Hick does not advocate a new religion in which the various manifestations of the Real are each and all taken as objects of worship. His position is that we can do no better than to relate ourselves to the Real through one of the religions, although we can provide no compelling reason for adopting one rather than another, and, of course, he advocates the reform of all the religions to purge them of their exclusivist claims.

Hick rejects the disguise model, because it implies that the differences in the ways in which the Real is understood result from the action of the Real Itself. The Real presents Itself in different ways to the followers of different religions, on this model, while Hick contends that the differences are human products. This contention brings Hick's thought closer to the construct model, although even here, Hick believes the contribution of human sensibilities is underestimated. On the construct model, the believers of different religions all experience the same Ultimate Reality, but describe it differently, while Hick holds that the experience of the Real is itself culturally conditioned:

> The Real is thus not experienced as it is in itself, but is postulated to satisfy (a) the basic faith that human religious

> experience is not purely projection but is at the same time a response to a transcendent reality or realities, and (b) the observation that Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism etc, which are communal responses to these different gods and absolutes, seem to be more or less equally effective contexts of human transformation from self-centeredness, with all the evils and miseries that flow from this, to a recentering in the Transcendent as experienced within one's own tradition.[49]

Mavrodes responds by denying that he meant to insult Hick by calling him a polytheist. He points out that according to Kant, when one sees a cantaloupe, one does not see the noumena, which is completely ineffable, but merely a phenomenon. The phenomena are the manifestations of the noumenal realm, and questions of number apply to them and not to the noumena. So, when it is claimed that there are thirty-nine cantaloupes, according to Kant, this does not mean that there are thirty-nine noumenal beings that manifest themselves as cantaloupes, but rather that there are thirty-nine real cantaloupes, which are phenomena manifesting the ineffable noumenal reality. Mavrodes concludes that Hick should accept some kind of polytheism if he is willing to assert that there are different gods (among other things) that have phenomenal reality as manifestations of the Ultimate

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[49] John Hick, "The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism", 284-285.

Reality. The fact that Hick rejects polytheism leads Mavrodes to suspect that Hick views the gods as fictional rather than as real phenomena. If this is so, the proper charge against Hick would be that of atheism rather than polytheism, but Mavrodes is respectful enough not to accuse Hick of atheism.

Mavrodes is not, however, shy of accusing Hick of inconsistency. Sometimes, as in the passage quoted above, Hick asserts that it is not the Real itself that is experienced, but merely the phenomenal entities of the various religions, but there are other passages in which he speaks of experience of the Real:

> ...I want to say that the Real *an sich* is postulated by us as a pre-supposition, not of the moral life, but of religious experience and the religious life, whilst the gods, as also the mystically known Brahman, Sunyata and so on, are phenomenal manifestations of the Real occurring within the realm of religious experience. Conflating these to theses one can say that the Real is experienced by human beings, but experienced in a manner analogous to that in which, according to Kant, we experience the world: namely by informational input from external reality being interpreted by the mind in terms of its own categorial scheme and thus coming to

> consciousness as meaningful phenomenal experience.[50]

Perhaps Kant is as much to be blamed for the ambiguity as is Hick. Sometimes they speak of the objects of experience as being the phenomena, because it is through the input of the human understanding that things coalesce into objects, but at the same time, there is some sense in which Kant and Hick want to speak about the unspeakable as an object, perhaps an ultimate object, of human experience.

Mavrodes picks up on this theme with relish. He points out that Hick affirms that the Real is one, while number is a category of the phenomena, not of the noumena, and that Hick uses the language of causality to speak of the relation between the Real and its manifestations, while causality is a phenomenal relation. Kant had the same sorts of problems. The same criticisms Mavrodes levels against Hick can be found in the works of Kant's critics. One of the most important of such criticisms is that the postulation of the noumenal realm can serve no explanatory purpose if the noumenal is ineffable. It is the realization of this fact that lead to the rise of German idealism, which is often explained as a Kantian view of phenomena minus the noumena. But if the noumenal realm is subtracted from Hick's philosophy of religion, what remains is merely the claim that all the religions are purely human constructs without any transcendent divinity to play any role in revelation. And this is atheism.

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[50] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion,* 243.

this is compatible with there being a variety of ritual ways ordained by God, the replacement of particular beliefs about the Ultimate by the notion that particular beliefs and practices are mere cultural products by means of which one approaches an ineffable reality reduces the specifically religious imperative.

Liberalism and reductive religious pluralism both emphasize faith over practice in religion. The fact that no one should be forced to espouse a given creed is taken by liberals as a definitive statement of religious freedom. The use of the coercive force of the state to impose laws at odds with religious codes, e.g. the illegality of Mormon polygamy, is not considered to impinge on religious freedom, for what is restricted is practice, not belief. Pluralism also emphasizes faith over practice in its very conception of the problem of religious diversity as one to be solved by an ultimate reconciliation of beliefs.

Neither liberalism nor reductive religious pluralism are religiously neutral. Both discriminate against religious views in which there is a strong emphasis on the practical social dimension of religion. This line of criticism has been leveled against Hick's pluralism by Ninian Smart,[53] who points out that differences among religions in truth-claims are at least matched in importance by differences in practice-claims. A similar critique of the religious pluralism of W. C. Smith has been presented by Alī Qulī Qarā'ī,[54]

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[53] Ninian Smart, "Truth and Religions," in Steven M. Cahn and David Shatz, eds., *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 291-300.

[54] See his lengthy review of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row,

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who argues effectively that religion has been understood as law no less than as faith in most of the major religious traditions of the world. Even if an ultimate resolution of truth-claims were a plausible suggestion, this would not resolve the conflict of practice-claims. What is distinctive and important about religions is not only their particular systems of belief, but rituals, ethical ideals, and laws. If a religion is valuable and worth preserving, much of its value would appear to stem from its practical side. A freedom of religion which was limited to freedom to believe as one chose, but not necessarily to practice the ordinances of one's faith would result in the devaluation of religion.

1. 4. 3. 2. *The Intolerance of Pluralism*

Hick's religious pluralism is the advocacy of a forced doctrinal synthesis. It will not allow for ultimate differences in religious belief. No matter how strenuously the Hindu or Buddhist denies the personal nature of ultimate reality, and no matter how fervently the Christian asserts it, Hick would claim that there is no real conflict. Each merely expresses features of his or her own avenue to the Ultimate. This fails to do justice to the lived differences and conflicts among the adherents of the world's religions. While religious pluralism is advertised as a theology of tolerance, it turns out to be intolerant of real religious differences.

1978) in *Al-Tawḥid* Vol. 3, No. 3, 163-189, concluded in Vol. 3, No. 4, 154-196.

1. 4. 3. 3. *Religion Confined to the Personal*

According to liberal political theory there is a sharp distinction between the public and private realms. Essentially private individuals posit a public realm through the social contract in order to satisfy mutual interests. Since the society includes those with differing religious ideas, religion is to be excluded from the public realm. Secularism is a corollary of political liberalism. Differences in religious belief are treated as aesthetic differences, or differences in taste. The social dimension of religion is subordinated to the personal. This attitude toward religion is also reflected in the philosophy of religious pluralism advocated by Hick and Smith, for they see differences in religion as cultural differences in the expression of belief. All the religions involve a turning of the individual from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, and the differences between the ways in which this is done in the various religions are non-essential, like matters of personal taste. According to reductive pluralism, preference for the Buddhist, Islamic, or Jewish ways is not to be decided by rational deliberation, for it is simply a matter of feeling, largely determined by one's cultural training. As a result of such a view, reductive pluralists, like liberals, will underrate the social dimensions of religion. The specifically religious is excluded from public discourse by the liberal because of the lack of mutual interest, and by the reductive pluralist because the specifically religious can have no cognitive import, since it is merely an aspect of personal preference.

Liberalism and reductive pluralism both present themselves in the guise of neutrality while in fact they both exclude various religious systems of belief and practice. In some cases we may applaud the

exclusions. No one should object to the fact that religions in which human sacrifice is a central part are stifled in liberal societies. While Hick is willing to allow for a hidden compatibility among a wide variety of beliefs, exclusivist beliefs themselves are to be rejected rather than reinterpreted. Reductive pluralism dismisses the exclusivist claims of any religion as nonessential, no matter how important in that religion's own tradition.

1. 4. 3. 4. *Post Modernism*

A number of recent critics whose views are presented and criticized by Peter Donovan[55] have taken note of the similarity between religious pluralism and political liberalism and reject both in favor of a post modernist approach. Both involve compromise, accommodation, and the abandonment of tradition. Some conservative Christian thinkers contend that pluralism must be rejected because it threatens to undermine the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. As political liberalism undermines the political power of the Church, religious pluralism undermines its dogmas.

> Jürgen Moltmann also likens pluralism in religion to the consumerism of Western society, and accuses it of a 'repressive tolerance', which allows everything a subjective possibility but is sceptical about any objective reality

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[55] Peter Donovan, "The Intolerance of Religious Pluralsim," *Religious Studies,* 29 (1993), 217-229.

being adequately mediated by religious symbols.[56]

Many of the critics on whom Donovan reports find common cause with post-modernist critiques of liberalism and the Enlightenment. Donovan finds it ironic "to see the descendants of Calvin and of the Inquisition joining forces with the disciples of Nietzsche to give lessons on tolerance to the children of the Enlightenment",[57] and he observes that despite their common cause in attacking liberalism, the conservative Christian and the postmodernist are fundamentally opposed on epistemological issues, with the postmodernist rejecting the realism of the conservative, while it is precisely because of his theological realism that the conservative cannot accept liberal religious pluralism.

Donovan himself seeks to defend some form of religious pluralism and liberalism, but only in the sense of respect for differences of belief, which he calls epistemic liberalism in contrast to the ideological liberalism of modernists who seek to bring the beliefs and practices of others into line with a secular, scientistic and humanistic world-view to form a uniform global culture. The culture of materialistic consumerism and extreme individualism associated with ideological liberalism threatens to destroy the Christian culture out of which it emerged, and which often seems to have been taken for granted by

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[56]. *Ibid.,* 218. Donovan here reports on the views of Moltmann expressed in his contribution to *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered,* Gavin D'Costa, ed., (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990).

[57] *Ibid.,* 219.

advocates of liberalism themselves, at least prior to the second half of the twentieth century. Although political liberalism arose out of an attempt to protect Christian culture from destroying itself through sectarian strife, the social changes which are justified by contemporary ideological liberalism are no less destructive, particularly the weakening of traditional familial relationships.

1. 4. 3. 5. *The Pluralist Program for the Revision of Religious Ethics*

The Christian response to the onslaught of ideological liberalism and its attendant social changes has been divided between the resistance and accommodation characteristic of conservative and liberal Christianity respectively. In this conflict, the religious pluralism advocated by John Hick, W. C. Smith and others provides a theological basis for ideological liberalism because it is precisely the moral perspective of ideological liberalism that underlies its standards of reform. Hick claims that on the basis of the common ethical ideals of the great traditions, beliefs may be discredited if they run contrary to the dominant ethical current, e.g. the Jewish doctrine of 'the chosen people'.[58]

Indeed, although Hick is willing to open the gates of heaven to the heathen, this does not mean that he is unwilling to pass moral judgment on religions. In fact, Hick argues that since reason cannot provide any useful criterion for grading religions, the standard against which they are to be measured is moral,

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[58] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, (New Haven: Yale, 1989), 339.

although even here the great religious traditions of the world are so rich and varied that they cannot be judged as totalities:

> How do we weight the savage aspects of life in some Eastern and Middle Eastern countries—the bloody massacres at the time of the partition of India, the cutting off of a thief's hands under Islamic law—against the Christian persecution of the Jews throughout the ages and above all in our own century?[59]

As is clear from Hick's query, the fact that whole traditions cannot be graded effectively does not mean that particular elements and practices are not to be judged. And what are the standards to be used for such judgments? Hick's answer is clear. His preferred moral response to the Ultimate Reality is modern liberalism. He does not mean to claim that Christianity is preferable to other religions because of its liberalism, but rather he invites all to moral approbation under the wide umbrella of religious pluralism to the extent that they are willing to participate in the liberal agenda, about which Hick writes:

> These modern liberal ideas have indeed first emerged in the West; but they are essentially secular ideas, which have been and are as much opposed as

[59] John Hick, "On Grading Religions" in *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 85.

> supported within the Christian churches. Contemporary Marxist, humanist and feminist critiques of economic, racial and sexual oppression have become common currency in Western liberal thinking, and have evoked their echoes in liberation and black and feminist theologies. But it would be erroneous to conclude, from the fact that these ideas have affected Western Christianity first among the religions, that Christianity has a proprietary interest in them. Our contemporary Western liberal-democratic, politically, racially and sexually liberated form of Christianity represents a creative synthesis of the Christian tradition with secular liberalism; and analogous syntheses are beginning to emerge within the other traditions.[60]

Muslims will have no quarrel with the liberal's rejection of racism, but from the standpoint of Islamic morals (and for that matter, traditional Christian morals, as well), "sexual liberation" is a euphemism for licentiousness together with its public acceptance, which has profound social consequences. While the contemporary Western liberal assimilates condemnation of homosexual behavior to racism, the contemporary Muslim considers any sort of sex out of wedlock, like racism, to be sinful.

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[60] *Ibid.* 86-87.

Hick's willingness to use his liberal standards to condemn the application of the shari'ah is also clearly stated:

> But, whilst the enshrining of detailed seventh-century Arabian laws as permanent divine commands for Islamic societies has hindered the development of more humane and sophisticated penal systems, fortunately it has not prevented many modern Islamic states from finding ways to depart in practice from the full rigour of the traditional Shariah. It has made penal advances difficult but happily not impossible.[61]

1. 4. 4. Summary

We can summarize the criticisms of Hick's religious pluralism as follows. First, it advertises itself as the toleration of different faith traditions while in fact it prescribes the mutilation of these traditions in order to eliminate the ultimate differences among them. Second, it considers the apparent conflicts among religious traditions to be doctrinal rather than practical, thus ignoring the importance of religious law and community. Third, by diminishing the importance of doctrinal differences it weakens the prescriptive force of religious law. Fourth, it dismisses the use of reason as a means to advance religious understanding and settle disputes, despite the fact that such rational argumentation has been

[61] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 336.

prominent in the theological or scholarly traditions of all the major world religions. Fifth, it construes mysticism as a means of obtaining personal religious experiences on the basis of which beliefs may be formed, while the very concept of religious experience is the invention of liberal Protestantism and is foreign to traditions such as Islam.[62] Sixth, it presupposes the correctness of the modern ethos of political liberalism despite the fact that this, too, is inconsistent with the moral traditions of the world religions as they have been understood for centuries. Seventh, the postulation of an Ultimate Reality as completely unknowable, along with the view that religious experience and understanding are entirely human constructs, is incompatible with the possibility of true revelation.

On the other hand, it is part of the appeal of Hick's program that it does promise some form of reconciliation, some attenuation of the conflicts among religious believers which cause so much suffering in the world today, even as it has for centuries past. It would seem that an ideal approach to the problem posed by the variety of religious faiths would be one which both recognized and allowed for ultimately irreconcilable differences in practice as well as theory, while at the same time providing motivation for tolerance. I believe that valuable suggestions for such an approach to the world's religions can be found

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[62] This does not mean that Muslims do not have religious experiences, but that, at least until very recently, they have not thought of their religious experiences in terms of a concept playing anything like the epistemological or theological roles of the concept of *religious experience* in the West after Schleiermacher and William James.

within the Islamic tradition, which I shall dub non-reductive pluralism. Non-reductive pluralism is able to avoid the objections raised against liberal or reductive pluralism while maintaining an attitude of tolerance and rejecting prejudice.

1. 5. *Why Muslims Should Reject Reductive Religious Pluralism*

In order to develop a non-reductive pluralism it will be helpful to reflect a bit more on why the sort of pluralism advocated by Hick might be expected to win little support among Muslims, and why it has won the support of an important, if small, group of Christians. The first difficulty has already been mentioned: Islam, like Judaism, features a legalistic form of piety. Its aspirations are social. No matter how miserably we fail, Muslims aspire to build a society founded on the example of the Prophet's just governance in accordance with Divine law. This aspiration cannot be sustained if the sharī'ah is nothing more than a byproduct of early medieval Arabia's cultural response to its Prophet's confrontation with Reality. In terms of the Christian experience, however, in which legalistic forms of piety are viewed at best with suspicion, if not condemned as outright Pharisaic hypocrisy, the idea that ritual laws and taboos are human constructs rather than Divine ordinances is much more likely to be welcomed. Another difficulty is that its relationship to other religions is a matter treated fairly extensively within the sharī'ah itself, and even in the Qur'ān. Pre-Islamic paganism cannot be viewed as simply another way in which man relates himself to Ultimate Reality, reconcilable with monotheism since polytheism and monotheism are conceptually different approaches to what is inconceivable. This aspect of Hick's pluralism seems to be what is most repugnant to many Christian thinkers, as well as Muslims. Monotheism is inherently iconoclastic, but if monotheism and polytheism are just two ways to the Ultimate, how can

we justify Abraham's breaking of the idols? Was his message really nothing more than that the worship of idols had become inappropriate in his time and locale? A non-reductive pluralism should respect the absolute claims of monotheism.

1. 6. *The Unacceptability of Inclusivism*

According to traditional Christian thinking, salvation is only possible through belief in Jesus Christ as Lord, and it is through this faith that one participates in the redemptive sacrifice of the Son of God. True belief is a necessary condition for salvation. Christians who are unwilling to go as far as Hick in their acceptance of nonbelievers yet who reject the dogmatic assertion of their damnation have found a third alternative in Karl Rahner's concept of anonymous Christians mentioned above. According to this idea non-Christians who lead good lives about whom it seems monstrous to claim that they must be damned may be said to be Christians even though they do not recognize this themselves. Rahner goes on to assert that if such people were properly exposed to the true teachings of Christ, they would abandon their former beliefs and become official Christians. Being an anonymous Christian is a bit like holding an honorary degree from a university, despite lack of training at the school, one's achievements are recognized by the university and the degree is awarded. Hick has argued that this view is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. It is patronizing. It fails to recognize the positive role a non-Christian faith may have in turning one from self-centeredness toward the Ultimate. It also substantially weakens the meaning of salvation through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ. If the university awards too many honorary degrees the value of its diploma will be deflated.

What is needed is a religious pluralism able to fully appreciate the significant differences among religions, able to recognize that different ways toward

human perfection and ultimate felicity are offered by the religions, despite their differences, and yet able to grant these points without diluting the strength of the religious claim by any kind of relativism. This is the promise of the non-reductive religious pluralism of Islam proposed below.

2. Part Two: The Non-Reductive Religious Pluralism of Islam



2. 1. *Introduction to Part Two*

When we consider how a non-reductive religious pluralism might be formulated in the context of Islam, we must keep in mind that the issue of religious pluralism emerges in Christianity as a *soteriological* theory in reaction to specifically Christian doctrines about salvation: that it is only through Christianity that one can benefit from the Redemption and gain salvation. A similar exclusivist doctrine can be found in some interpretations of the Jewish claim to be 'the chosen people'. These doctrines are thoroughly condemned in the Qur'ān:

> ﴿*And they say none shall enter paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian, these are their vain wishes. Say, 'Bring your proof if your are truthful.' Yes! Whosoever submits himself to Allah and he is a doer of good, for him there shall be his reward with his Lord, on such shall be no fear nor shall they grieve.*﴾ (2:110-111)

Religious pluralism emerges in Christianity as a reaction against the very attitude so eloquently condemned in the verses cited above. According to traditional Christian teaching, there is no way to salvation aside from the redemption offered by Christ, and even the great prophets, peace be with them, must wait in limbo until the resurrection, after which Christ must come to release them! Those Christian theologians who have opposed this line of thought and

have sought to allow that non-Christians can achieve salvation have claimed that the saving faith either includes the unconscious acceptance of Christianity or is the common heritage of the world's major religious traditions. Despite their differences, there is a common presumption shared by the various Christian parties to the dispute on pluralism. For Hick and Rahner, as well as the dogmatist, correct faith is necessary for salvation. In order to widen the opening of the gates of heaven, Rahner extends the notion of correct faith to those who live as if they were Christians and who would accept Christianity if properly exposed to it, while Hick goes further to deny that the apparent differences among the world's faiths are irreconcilable. Hick's ultimate reconciliation is what makes apparently different faiths correct. What Hick does is to loosen the condition of correct belief so that it reduced to the common factor in all the world's religions, however abstract this may be; nevertheless, it remains as much a part of Hick's doctrine as Luther's that there can be no salvation without correct faith, even if the correct faith according to Hick is something of a least common denominator.

In order to understand how to approach the problem of religious pluralism in the context of Islam, the various facets of religious pluralism must be clearly distinguished, especially the differences among soteriological, alethic and deontic religious pluralisms. According to Islam, the correct religion ordained by God is that revealed to the last of His chosen prophets, Muḥammadﷺ; this and no other religion is required by Allah of all mankind. In this sense, Islam is exclusivist: it rejects a thorough deontic religious pluralism. However, at various times prior to His final revelation, God ordained other religions by

means of His prophets, and the admission of this requires a limited or diachronic deontic religious pluralism, which will be examined more closely below. So, the reason why the religion brought by Moses is not acceptable today is not that what Moses taught was wrong or incompatible with the teachings brought by Muḥammad, for they taught the same things, but because God has ordained the latter teachings for this era. The previous teachings were not incorrect, and they were sufficient to guide the people for whom they were revealed to salvation. Although some scholars seek to minimize the importance of this fact by appealing to riwāyāt (narrations) according to which the differences among the revealed religions amount to no more than the details of ritual practice, such as how many prostrations occur in various prayers, the number of days on which fasting is prescribed, and the like, there can be no denying that different paths can lead to God, and in different circumstances have been ordained by Him.

All of the divinely revealed religions are called *Islām* in the general sense of complete submission to the commands of Allah, while *Islām* is used in a specific sense to refer to the final version of Islam (in the general sense) brought by Muḥammad. The difference between general and specific Islam gives rise to a number of interesting questions. How much variation can there be in the varieties of general Islam? Could God have ordained a version of general Islam for a people so different from us that we would not recognize it as such? Why did God ordain different versions of general Islam? The exact answers to these

questions are with God alone.[63] But in the present age, general Islam implies specific Islam, and this must be understood if one is not to fall into error about the position of Islam with respect to religious diversity.

In the present human condition, it is specific Islam, Muḥammadan Islam, and it is only Muḥammadan Islam, which is the revealed religion which He calls upon us to follow. Nothing less is demanded, and nothing better is possible. There are several good reasons for this exclusivist element of Islam. First, the call to Islam is a call to unity of belief:

> ﴿He *has laid down for you the religion which He enjoined upon Noah, and which We revealed to you, and which We enjoined upon Abraham, Moses and Jesus: Establish the religion, and be not divided therein.*﴾ (42:13)

Islam presents itself as a way to reconcile the differences between Jews and Christians. The compromise offered by Islam affirms common elements between Judaism and Christianity, and accepts Christ ﷺ as one of the greatest prophets of all time, but not as "God the Son" or as "the Redeemer". Christianity erred by failing to allow divine guidance

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[63] The question of religious diversity is taken up by Ibn al-'Arabi, in chapter 48 of the *Futūḥāt*, in which he explains that religious diversity is the product of the diversity in the divine relationships. Cf. William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 155-160.

as a means to salvation without the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The remedy to this error proposed by Hick has been recognized by many to amount to a dismantling of Christian theology. In Islam, on the other hand, from its very inception, there has been awareness of other revealed religions by which felicity was obtained during the periods of their validity. So, the basic teachings of the Christian way are accepted by Islam, but the theological elaboration of those teachings in such doctrines as the Trinity, the Redemption and the Incarnation are rejected. Islam's willingness to accept the previous prophets as ordained by God comes with a demand that His final apostle Muḥammadﷺ also be accepted.

The form of pluralism suggested here is like the famous Muḥammadan compromise about the placement of the black stone. When the Meccan tribes quarreled over who should have the honor of placing the black stone during the refurbishing of the Ka'abah, the compromise offered by Muḥammadﷺ was that members of the rival tribes could each hold a corner of the blanket by which the stone would be raised and then Muḥammadﷺ would set it in place.

It is because of the demand for the recognition of the Seal of the Prophetsﷺ that the reductive pluralists' solution to the problem of religious diversity cannot be accepted. To accept only some of the prophets to the exclusion of others, particularly Muḥammadﷺ, with the excuse that it makes no difference because all the religions are ultimately saying the same thing, is to fail to heed the divine call.

> ﴿*Verily those who deny God and His apostles and desire that they differentiate between God and His apostles and say 'We believe in some*

> *and we deny some', and intend to take a course between this (and that),*
> *These are the infidels, truly, and We have prepared for the infidels a disgraceful torment.*﴾ (4:150-151)

There can be no Islamic version of reductive pluralism because Islam directly addresses itself to the question of religious diversity and calls for the dominion of Islam over all other religions:

> ﴿*He it is Who sent His Apostle with guidance and the religion of truth, that He may make it prevail over all religions, although the polytheists may be averse.*﴾ (9:33)[64]

According to reductive religious pluralism there can be no better reason for adopting one religion rather than another than cultural affinity. As a result, the importance of the divine law is undermined. In the context of Islam, on the other hand, the *shari'ah* brought by God's final chosen Apostle ﷺ is understood as the perfection of all previously ordained ways. The divine call to follow the law of Islam is extended to all humanity, not merely to those of a specific cultural setting:

> ﴿*And We did not send you but to all people as a bearer of good tidings and as a warner, but most people do not know.*﴾ (34:28)

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[64] Similar *āyāt* are (48:28) and (61:9).

With regard to the question of the correctness of faith, the position of Islam is clear. At various times in human history different faiths and laws were decreed by Allah. At present, however, there is but one divinely ordained religion, Muḥammadan Islam, which requires belief in *tawḥīd*, prophecy (*nabbuwah*), and the Resurrection (*ma'ād*), and according to Shī'ī theology, *imāmah*, and divine justice, as well. As God says:

> ﴿*O you who believe! Believe in Allah and His Apostle and the Book which He has sent down to His Apostle and the Book which He sent down before; and whoever denies Allah and His angels and His books and His apostles and the Last Day has indeed strayed off, far away.*﴾ (4:136)

Not only is a verbal or mental affirmation of these things required, for the divine call is a call to *īmān*, which is not quite what is expressed by the English word "faith". To have *īmān*, to be a *mū'min*, is to be wholeheartedly committed, to believe *in* as well as to believe *that*, and to be ready to put one's beliefs into action.[65]

> ﴿*It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East and the*

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[65] ﴿*The desert Arabs say, 'We believe.' Say, 'You did not beleive, but say, "We submit," for faith has not yet entered your hearts; and if you obey Allah and His Apostle, He will lessen naught of your deeds; verily Allah is oft-forgiving, Merciful.*﴾ (49:14)

> *West, righteousness is rather one who believes in Allah and the Last Day and the angels and the Book, the apostles, and gives his wealth out of love for Him to the kindred and the orphans and the poor and the wayfarer and the needy and for those in bondage, and established prayer and pays* zakāt *and those who fulfill their promise when they make a promise and the patient ones in distress and affliction and in the time of war. These are they who are the Truthful and these are they who are the pious.*﴾ (2:177)

In sum, reductive pluralism is incompatible with Islam because according to reductive pluralism there is no requirement to accept all of the prophets ﷺ and no requirement to obey the practical laws given through God's last chosen messenger ﷺ, while according to the teachings of Islam, these divine prescriptions are clear. Reductive religious pluralism presents itself as an opening up toward other traditions, while from the standpoint of Islam, it is an attempt to open the way to *kufr*, a covering of one's eyes and ears to the truth of God's final revelation and its practical implications.

Hick is perfectly well aware of the inconsistency between Islam and the reductive religious pluralism he proposes. He admits:

> In Islam there is the firm belief that Muhammad was 'the seal of the prophets' and that through the Qur'ān God has revealed to mankind the true religion, taking up into itself and fulfilling all previous revelations.

> Thus, whilst a Muslim should give friendly recognition to those within the other Abrahamic faiths and may even, in some interpretations, extend the Qur'ānic concept of the People of the Book to include those who encounter the divine through the Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist as well as Jewish and Christian scriptures, yet he or she will retain a strong sense of the unique status of the Qur'ānic revelation. Here is God's final, decisive and commanding word which all must heed and obey. And such a conviction, again, does not naturally encourage a full and unqualified acceptance of religious pluralism.[66]

The solution proposed by Hick to this conflict is garbed in the euphemism "creative doctrinal development,"[67] which the scholars of Islam would call *bid'ah* (heresy). Hick also expresses his optimism that sufi ideas may help win acceptance for reductive religious pluralism in the Islamic world, so that Islam may take roughly the same course that he has charted for Christianity. (May Allah preserve us from such a fate!) The patronizing tone in the following passage is typical of the liberal mentality:

> Islam may be expected to go through essentially the same traumas as

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[66] John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 48-49.
[67] *Ibid.*, 50.

> Christianity in its encounter both with modern science and with the emerging ecumenical outlook; only whereas the Christian trauma has been spread over a century or more Islam is having to adjust in a single generation to an already formed modern culture. It is to be hoped that the Muslim world will eventually find its own Qur'anic way of combining modern knowledge with its faith in the Transcendent and its commitment to a morality of human community. And we may further hope that this development will also include an increased recognition of the ecumenical point of view that has already been so powerfully expressed within the Sufi strand of Islam.[68]

The final remark about 'the Sufi strand of Islam' is the topic of the next section.

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[68] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion,* 378.

2. 2. *The Rejection of Reductive Religious Pluralism by the Sufis*

If Hick is under the impression that his reductive religious pluralism can find support in true *taṣawwuf* or *'irfan*, a fairly powerful argument can be given that he is mistaken, the outlines of which may take the following form. While there may be some degenerate sufi *ṭarīqāt* willing to play the role assigned for them by Hick, and there are orders in the West into which non-Muslims have been initiated, the vast majority of the *'urafā* of Islam have required strict observance of the *sharī'ah* prior to initiation into spiritual wayfaring (*sayr wa sulūk*). Another strand of supposedly sufi thought that affirms a form of religious pluralism is that associated with advocates of *perennial philosophy*, Guenon, Schuon, Nasr, and others, which will be considered separately.

Hick is fond of citing the following couplet of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī: "The lamps are different, but the Light is the same."[69] But this is what the Qur'ān also affirms: ﴿*Verily We sent down the Torah in which there is guidance and light...*﴾ (5:44), ﴿*And We caused Jesus son of Mary to follow in their footsteps confirming the Torah which was before him and We gave him the Evangel in which was guidance and light...*﴾ (5:46). But the conclusion reached in the Qur'ān is not that because all these religions have divine light that it makes no difference which we follow, nor that which we follow should be considered

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[69] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 233; *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 108.

analogously to one's ethnicity.[70] It is not as though we are presented with different lamps from which we are to choose in accordance with our own taste, background and the quality of our personal experiences; rather God presents the lamps to humanity in succession, and it is our responsibility to follow what God has assigned for us at the present age.

When in dispute with Rūmī, the Christian, al-Jarrāḥ, seeks to excuse his Christianity as the religion of his fathers, Rūmī protests:

> That is not the action or the words on an intelligent man possessed of sound senses. God gave you an intelligence of your own other than your father's intelligence, a sight of your own other than your father's sight, a discrimination of your own. Why do you nullify your sight and your intelligence, following an intelligence which will destroy you and not guide you?[71]

Rūmī goes on to give some examples of how reason dictates that we accept what is of superior benefit to us over that which our fathers had. He claims that even a

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[70] Hick considers religious affiliation analogous to ethnicity in *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 47.

[71] *Discourses of Rūmī*, tr. Arthur J. Arberry (Richmond: Curzon, 1993), 135. Compare the translation by W. M. Thackston, Jr., *Signs of the Unseen* (Putney: Threshold, 1994), 131.

dog who learns hunting for a king will no longer browse through rubbish as its sire had done.

> If the intellect of the beast holds fast to what it has found better than what it inherited from its parents, it is monstrous and horrible that a man, superior to all the inhabitants of the earth in reason and discrimination, should be less than a beast. We take refuge with God from that!
>
> Certainly it is right that he should say that the Lord of Jesus, upon whom be peace, honoured Jesus and brought him nigh to Him, so that whoever serves him has served the Lord, whoever obeys him has obeyed the Lord. But inasmuch as God has sent a prophet superior to Jesus, manifesting by his hand all that He manifested by Jesus' hand and more, it behooves him to follow that Prophet, for God's sake, not for the sake of the Prophet himself.[72]

Rūmī was by no means a reductive religious pluralist of the sort Hick makes him out to be.

The sufis have sought to explain the fact that there are differences in the religions which have been divinely ordained with the distinction between the exterior (*ẓāhir*) and the interior (*bāṭin*) of the religions. The differences among them are exterior differences;

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[72] *Ibid.*, 136.

the interior is the same. However, the vast majority of sufis have affirmed the duty to follow the prescriptions of the law of Islam with the slogan: no *tarīqah* without *sharī'ah*. There is no way to the interior except but through the exterior, and the exterior required in the current age is that of Islam.

> Just as a thing fails if it lacks a kernel, so too it fails without a skin. If you sow a seed in the earth without its husk, it fails to germinate, whereas if you bury it in the earth with its husk it does germinate and becomes a great tree.[73]

Furthermore, the light said in the Qur'ān to be found in the Torah and Evangel refers to these books as God gave them to the prophets, not in the adulterated forms in which, according to Islam, they are found today, and the light of the previous religions certainly does not refer to the doctrines explicitly rejected by the Qur'an, such as the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Trinity. Rūmī explicitly and strenuously rejects the claim that Jesus ﷺ is God as contrary to reason in refutation of the claim made by al-Jarrāḥ that some sufis had accepted the doctrine of the Incarnation.[74] The fact that there are many lamps but one light does not imply that it makes no difference which religion we follow or that we can rest content with what has been bestowed upon us by family and culture. For Rūmī, as for all Muslims, there is but one right path, *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*.

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[73] *Ibid.*, 31.
[74] *Ibid.*, §29, 134f.

Nevertheless, a theme commonly found in the sufi poets such as ʿAṭṭar, Rūmī and Ḥāfiẓ is the expression of affinity toward Christianity or Zoroastrianism or idol worship. This might lead some to the mistaken conclusion that these poets considered the differences between Islam and the other religions to be insignificant. What is really to be found in such expressions is the condemnation of the display of the outward signs of affiliation to Islam without any inward faith. It would be better to have nominal affiliation to an incorrect creed, but to believe sincerely in it and to follow the guidance in it for spiritual advancement than to be a hypocrite who outwardly professes Islam while inwardly he worships *ṭāghūt*. The condemnation of hypocrisy in the Qur'ān is clear:

> ﴿*Surely the hypocrites are in the lowest stage of the fire, and you shall not find a helper for them.*﴾ (4:145)

> ﴿*And Allah has promised the hypocrite men and the hypocrite women and the infidels the fire of hell to abide in it forever; this is enough for them; and Allah curses them and for them is a lasting punishment.*﴾ (9:67)

If we are to compare different forms of *kufr*, surely that of the hypocrite is worse than that of the sincere Zoroastrian. The outward denial of orthodoxy found in Ḥāfiẓ (and Imām Khomeini), e.g., staining the prayer mat with wine or having recourse to the Magi (*pīr-e moghān*), becomes a means of indicating the interior dimension of religion and denying hypocrisy, but unless the hyperbole is understood in

this symbolism, it will appear as apostasy. Hypocrisy occurs with the outward affirmation of Islam and the inward denial. Imām Khomeini, following the example of Ḥāfiẓ, wishes to emphasize the opposite of hypocrisy, sincere belief in Islam, so he exaggerates by invoking the opposite extreme, the outward denial of Islam with its inward affirmation; in this way *kufr* becomes a symbol for true *imān*!

Kiss the hand of the sheikh
who has pronounced me a disbeliever.
Congratulate the guard
who has led me away in chains.
I am going into solitary retreat
from now on by the door of the Magus.[75]

In the school of Ibn al-'Arabī there is an emphasis on the way in which apparently contradictory beliefs may express a single truth from different perspectives. In this way, the differences in the divinely ordained religions are explained. Even though they contradict each other outwardly, each of them expresses a single divine truth. Other sufis have speculated that the sacred texts of Hinduism were based on divinely revealed scripture, and yet others have advanced the hypothesis that the Buddha was the prophet Dhū al-Kifl.[76] However, the fact that God's truth can find

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[75] From *Sabū-ye 'Ishq*, translated as, *A Jug of Love: Eight Ghazals of Imām Khomeini*, tr. Muḥammad Legenhausen and Aẓim Sarvdalir (Tehran: Islamic Thought Foundation, 1994).

[76] See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam and the Encounter of Religions" in *Sufi Essays, 2nd ed.* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 123-151.

expression in different, even apparently conflicting religions, does not mean that people are free to choose whatever religion suits their fancy. Ibn al-'Arabī himself, when asked by a Muslim ruler for advice about how to treat the Christians, responded that they should be treated as stipulated by Islamic law,[77] and he asserts that it is incumbent upon people in the present age to follow the *sharī'ah* brought by Muhammad[78] and it is in this sense that all previously revealed religions become invalid (*bāṭil*) with the revelation of the Qur'ān, not that they become false, this, Ibn al-'Arabī says, is the opinion of the ignorant, but that it becomes obligatory to follow the *sharī'ah* of specific Islam rather than that of a previous revealed religion. In this sense all previously decreed systems of religious law do become null and void, not because they are worthless, but because whatever is needed from them has been incorporated into the final revelation. He puts it as follows:

> All the revealed religions [*sharā'i'*] are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. When the sun appears, the lights of the stars are hidden, and their lights are included in the light of the sun. Their being hidden is like the abrogation of the other revealed religions that takes place through

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[77] See Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulpher: The Life of Ibn 'Arabi* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993).

[78] *Futūḥāt*, III 311.23, see *Imaginal Worlds*, 155.

> Muhammad's revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the light of the stars is actualized. This explains why we have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions. They are not rendered null [*bāṭil*] by abrogation—that is the opinion of the ignorant.[79]

The difference between the sufis and the theologians on the diversity of religions is one of emphasis more than explicit doctrine. The sufis emphasize the inner unity of the revealed religions while the theologians emphasize the outward superiority of Islam, but there is no real difference on either point. The theologians admit that the previous revealed religions contain light and guidance, for this is explicitly stated in the Qur'ān. The fact that in the present age it is only the Islam revealed to Muḥammad ﷺ that is valid and whose law is obligatory is also accepted by the sufis. Both groups hold that the previously revealed religions, including the Christianity brought by Jesus ﷺ, do not contain any doctrinal differences from Islam, but the sufi is more willing than the theologian to look for insights contained in the other religions, despite what is considered by both the theologian and the sufi to be the accretion of doctrinal error, to the precise extent that the primary concern of the sufi is spiritual insight

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[79] *Futūḥāt*, III 153.12, translated by William Chittick in *Imaginal Worlds*, 125.

rather than doctrine. Because of his attention to the inward dimension, the *'ārif* is also willing to allow for greater variance in outward diversity as expressions of a single Truth than those whose major preoccupation is doctrinal and ritual detail. In any case, both groups hold that Islam brings to perfection all that was contained in the previously revealed religions, and is the sole religion prescribed by God for the present age until the end of time. However, the *'ārif* is willing to give poetic expression to his faith and to the rejection of hypocrisy through the symbols of the other religions, and even idol worship, as in the following lines from Bābā Ṭāhir and Imām Khomeini, respectively:

Happy are they who don't know their hands from their feet,
those among the flames who know neither wet nor dry.
Synagogue, Ka'abah, idol-temple, monastery,
none are known to be empty of the sweetheart.[80]

At the door of the tavern,
temple, mosque and monastery,
I have fallen in prostration,
as though You had glanced upon me.[81]

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[80] From the *Dīvān* of Bābā Ṭāhir, translated by Muhammad Legenhausen and 'Aẓim Sarvdalir.

[81] From *Sabū-ye 'Ishq*, translated by Muhammad Legenhausen and 'Aẓim Sarvdalir.

2. 3. *Perennial Philosophy and Religious Pluralism*

On 25 October 1994, the Turkish scholar Adnan Aslan interviewed Profs. Nasr and Hick at the home of John Hick in Birmingham. The topic of discussion was religious pluralism, about which Dr. Aslan was writing his doctoral dissertation. The interview, which was published in the *Islamic Quarterly*,[82] is quite thought provoking.

Here follows a brief summary of the discussion, and then comments and criticisms. Dr. Nasr writes as an exponent of the school of thought called perennial philosophy and *sophia perennis*. This school of thought claims to represent the esoteric dimension of all the world religions, and in particular, Islamic gnosis, *'irfān* or *taṣawwuf*. One of the founders of the school, the late Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), claimed to be the *qutb* of a branch of the Shadhdhalī sufi tradition, and was called Shaykh 'Īsā Nūr al-Dīn Aḥmad. Dr. Nasr draws heavily on his thinking. So, the claims of Dr. Nasr about religious pluralism might be interpreted as indicating its acceptance among the sufis, contrary to what I have argued above. However, for the reasons given above, as well as the points of criticism to be found below, it seems that the views of Dr. Nasr on religious pluralism (as expressed in the

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[82] Adnan Aslan, "Religions and the Concept of the Ultimate," *The Islamic Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (1996), 266-283. The translation of this interview to Persian by Aḥmadrida Jalilī appeared in *Ma'rifat*, No. 23, (Winter 1376/1998) 70-79. The interview appears reprinted as an appendix to Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy: The Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Surrey: Curzon, 1998), 257-273.

interview by Adnan Aslan, at least) are neither tenable nor consistent with the interpretation of Islam according to the teachings of the vast majority of the great Muslim thinkers of the past, including authentic traditional sufi teachings.

2. 3. 1. Synopsis of the Discussion

Perhaps the strangest thing about the discussion is the point with which John Hick begins. He notes that both he and Dr. Nasr agree on the truth of different religions, but observes the main difference between them is that Hick sees this as requiring the reform of the religions, while Nasr wants to leave the traditions alone. What then unfolds is the odd spectacle of a Christian cleric who would reform Christianity by denying the Trinity being advised by a Muslim sage that the doctrine of the Trinity must not be abandoned by Christians. Such an ironic turn of events is surely a sign that the end times are near!

Nasr states that while Hick sees the differences among religion to be due to human factors, he sees them as divinely ordained because of human differences. Nasr will admit a need for reform but only to the extent necessary to dispel the sense of absoluteness harbored by exclusivists.

According to Hick, the concepts of omnipotence, omniscience, and many others that are taken to indicate attributes of God, are entirely human products which do not accurately describe what he prefers to call the infinite or the ultimate as it is in itself.

Nasr responds that the ways in which God describes Himself in revelation are not human inventions, and must not be subject to any supposed program of reform. He claims that change in religion must be gradual and organic or natural, although he

hastens to add that there can be no change in the immutable divine laws of Islam or Judaism.

The distinction Nasr makes between those aspects of religion in which acceptable organic change is possible and those aspects which are immutable prompts Hick to ask how the difference can be discerned. Hick's primary concern here is with Christian claims about the divinity of Christ. Is this to be seen as an essential element of Christianity or as an accretion to be reformed?

Nasr does not provide any criterion by which to distinguish the immutable from the reformable, but insists that God would not allow a major religion to rest on a single mistake for two thousand years. Nasr goes so far as to assert that even if historical documents could prove that Christ and his Apostles did not believe in the doctrines of the Trinity or Incarnation, such doctrines were divinely willed for later Christians.

Hick responds that the idea of God's not allowing fundamental error to persist in a major religion to which Nasr appeals presupposes a personification of the Ultimate which Hick finds unacceptable. For Hick, the concept of the divine will is merely a human response to the Ultimate. After some cross-examination by Hick, Nasr accepts that the concept of divine will is applicable to certain manifestations of the Real rather than to the Real in itself, although he also contends that the Divine takes into consideration, i.e., wills, the way in which It will become manifest.

If this discussion exposes a difficulty in Nasr's thought, the going gets rougher in the next exchange, in which Nasr apparently denies the principle of non-contradiction. He claims that although the Christian and Islamic descriptions of Christ are contradictory,

they are nevertheless both true, and admits that this is "very difficult from a rationalistic point of view."

Nasr next alludes to different perspectives and different "levels of knowing" by means of which the contradiction could be resolved, but he does not explain how Christ could be crucified on one level and not on another. He claims that only an elite of advanced thinkers will be able to understand his claims, and he compares the situation with that of astronomical knowledge. Nasr also explains the differences among religions in terms of the intellectual climates during which the religions emerged. Christianity had to confront Greco-Roman rationalism, which was no threat to Arabia in the years leading up to the coming of Islam. The differences between what Christianity and Islam say about Christ are thus, according to Nasr, due to the different functions played by Christ in the two religions in order to lead the people of different cultural and historical environments to salvation.

The discussion becomes even more confused when Hick asks whether such absolute claims within the religions have not often caused them to go to war. Instead of separating the moral and metaphysical questions, Nasr responds that most modern wars have been prompted by secular ideologies (fascism, nationalism, communism). Hick protests that religions often contribute to divisiveness and Nasr answers that the differences among religions confirm the existence of different human collectivities.

Then both Hick and Nasr agree that religions should get rid of their claims to be the one and only truth, Nasr reasserts his communal relativism with the claim that exclusivist statements attributed to Christ are meant only for Christians, not for Muslims and vice versa. Hick agrees, "No one comes to the Father

but through me" is only to be true for the Christians, not universally. This denial of universality is also accepted by Nasr with respect to Islam, and he claims that Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī had the same idea. Hick agrees that the sufi element of Islam has always been pluralistic.

Aslan next asks who can be saved. Hick responds that anyone who is empty of self and open to the Ultimate is saved. Nasr first affirms his belief in a Qur'ānic eschatology, but then he claims that the different eschatologies of all the religions are "correct in their own spiritual universe." Hick agrees.

Finally, on the issue of religion and science, both Nasr and Hick agree that science cannot guide theology.

2. 3. 2. Comments on the Discussion

Through his vigorous defense of Islamic thought and culture in a long series of eloquent and erudite articles and books, Dr. Nasr has emerged as the most eminent Muslim intellectual in the U.S.. No one else has defended Islam with the quality and quantity of his writings in English. Hence, what Dr. Nasr has to say about the important topic of religious pluralism,[83] at

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[83] Nasr also discusses the topic of religious pluralism in his *Religion and Religions: The Challenge of Living in the Multireligious World* (Charlotte: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985); "Principal Knowledge and the Multiplicity of Sacred Forms," Ch. 9 of *Knowledge and the Sacred,* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 280-308; "Islam and the Encounter of Religions," in *Sufi Essays,* 2nd ed., (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 123-151; and, most recently, "Religion and Religions," Ch. 1 of *Religion and the Order* ...

the very least, will have serious consequences for the way Islam is understood in America, and the rest of the English speaking world. Since Dr. Nasr presents himself as a defender of tradition and of sufi thought, it is not unlikely that his stance will be taken as an indication that religious pluralism is accepted in traditional Islamic sufism. Yet, it seems that such sufi giants as Rūmī and Ibn 'Arabī would not have accepted the pluralism he advocates. Perhaps the source of the pluralism defended by Dr. Nasr is not to be found in the sufi tradition at all, but in the European romantic tradition as it survived in the twentieth century among the connoisseurs of the occult in Paris.

2. 3. 2. 1. Religious Pluralism and *Sophia perennis*

The approach taken by Dr. Nasr is that of the perennial philosophy he has advocated for years, with acknowledgments of the works of Frithjof Schuon. With regard to the topic of religious pluralism, the most important work of Schuon is his very first book, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*.[84] This book expands on a theme common among the 'urafā of Islam, that the divine religions are different only in their external aspects, but have the same interiors.

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of Nature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 9-28.

[84] First published in French as *De L'Unité Transcendante Des Religions* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1948), a revised edition of the English translation by Peter Townsend was published in 1975 by Harper and Row. Also worthy of note is Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1985).

Schuon's ideas may be further traced to Rene Guenon (1886-1951) who appears to have initiated the school of thought associated with the advocacy of *sophia perennis* or *philosophia perennis*. The basic idea of this school is that all the religions are ultimately saying the same thing but in different ways, but that to see this universal core, one must turn from the exoteric to the esoteric aspects of the religions.

Given this background, one of the most prominent differences between the approach taken by Hick and Nasr to the plurality of religions is that for Hick the problem is first and foremost soteriological and moral, and subsequently epistemological and metaphysical, while for Nasr religious diversity is primarily a metaphysical or (more specifically) a theosophical problem, although he does not ignore its epistemological and moral dimensions. Hick begins with traditional Christian exclusivism, the doctrine that there is no salvation outside the church (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*), which he finds unacceptable because he cannot believe that the good people of non-Christian traditions of faith will not be saved. The rejection of the traditional Christian doctrine of salvation has major implications for theology and religious epistemology, to which Hick has devoted considerable attention for more than twenty years.

For Nasr, on the other hand, a pluralistic acceptance of the esoteric unity of all religions is a core feature of the perennial philosophy, and is merely one more aspect of the relationship between the One and the many which is to be found in so many variations among the writings of the sufis.

Perhaps the attitudes of both Nasr and Hick toward the multiplicity of religions are outgrowths of nineteenth century romanticism, for Guenon's teachings on the *philosophia perennis* arose out of the

occultist circles of Paris in which a romantic view of the orient was itself hardly exotic, while Hick's ideas are founded on a liberal Protestant ethos which can be traced to Schleiermacher's romanticism. But romantic optimism plays decidedly different roles in the two contemporary thinkers, so that Hick sees himself as leading a movement of theological reform within Christianity that will lead Christians to have more tolerance for others, while Nasr is led to an optimistic reading of traditional beliefs of all the major religions without any modernizing reform. Hick idealizes the future of Christianity, while Nasr idealizes its past. And both would extend their respective idealizations beyond Christianity to all the major religions of the world. So Hick invites Muslims and Jews to join his reform movement by making analogous reforms in their own creeds to annul the exclusivism he abhors, and Nasr is willing to defend the perennial wisdom to be found in shamanism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, etc., as traditionally taught and practiced.

2. 3. 2. 2. Divine and Human Elements of Religion

The fundamental difference between the ways Hick and Nasr view religion in general is that while Hick sees it as a human phenomenon, Nasr sees it as divine revelation. Likewise, Schleiermacher considers the essence of religion to lie in religious experience, while for Schuon the marrow of all religion is to be found in transcendent reality.[85] Thus it is that, for Hick, differences among religions are to be explained in terms of the different human reactions to the Real,

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[85] See Huston Smith's introduction to *The Transcendent Unity of Religions,* revised edition, xxi-xxiii.

while, for Nasr, the differences among religions are explained in terms of the different manifestations through which the Real presents Itself.

It would seem that both positions are rather extreme. Hick seems to err by making religion too much of a human construct, although he rejects the ideas of Durkheim, Marx and Freud, according to whom religion is entirely determined by social, economic or psychological factors. Hick contends that religion is a genuine response to the Real, but it is a human response to the real whose form is determined by humans rather than God, while Nasr seems to think that it all must be divine. If we must fall into error, it would seem more pious to accept the position offered by Nasr, for true religion teaches that there is a sense in which everything that takes place does so by the will of God, and that revealed truth is sent by God rather than constructed by human factors. Ultimately, however, a middle course must be found between the views of Hick and Nasr if we realize that there are human constructions as well as divine revelations contained in the religious traditions of mankind. They are not to be equalized by the two false claims that the religions are all completely human constructions or completely divine manifestations. Even if the light of divinity shines through all the major religious traditions, this does not mean that the intensity of the light is the same in all of them. Even if each star, in its own system of planets, is a sun, this does not make all such suns equal in luminosity and the ability to support spiritual life. Furthermore, even if Christianity was at one time the most luminous of divinely revealed religions, this does not mean that it has been able to maintain its original intensity even within its own world throughout the course of its history.

Hick is right to assert that religious differences may reflect differences in human attempts to confront the Real, but he is wrong to think that the Real cannot purposefully make Itself manifest in different, even apparently contradictory ways, and hence that all difference must have its source in human fabrications. Hick presents his religious pluralism with the Kantian contrast between the noumenon and the phenomena, with the Real, or Ultimate Reality, playing a noumenal role and religion being considered as phenomenal. If we look at the history of Western philosophy after Kant, we see that German idealism was based on the observation that Kant's noumena had become so cut off from phenomenal reality that nothing would be lost by its elimination. If Hick is unable to defend his noumenon better than Kant, we should be left with religion as nothing more than a product of culture, rather than as a vehicle to the divine.[86]

Nasr is right to insist that the religions as revealed by God are different crystallizations of the divine message; but he is wrong to think that because of this, the doctrines accepted by the major religious traditions today are all divinely sanctioned.

Both Hick and Nasr advocate forms of religious relativism, yet the forms of relativism they favor are not as extreme as could be imagined. Both seek to preserve some sense of the absolute quality of each of the religious world views, but, to use Schuon's phrase, it is only the relatively absolute that is to be found in the manifestations of the specific religious traditions.

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[86] This point is also made by Roger Trigg, "Theological Realism and Antirealism," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, eds., (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 219.

Neither is willing to allow a potpourri religion gathered from various creeds according to taste. Both see themselves as defenders of their respective traditions against the onslaughts of modern skepticism.

2. 3. 2. 3. Is Traditional Christian Dogma Divine?

The argument Nasr gives in his discussion with Hick for the God given character of traditional Christianity, however, is atrocious. With respect to the question of whether Jesus is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, he asks rhetorically:

> If this was simply a mistake, how could God allow, with His infinite wisdom and justice, one of the major religions of the world within which millions of people have sought their salvation, to be misguided for two thousand years? Was this simply a mistake?...
> If one says that this was all a horrendous mistake for this thousand years, I cannot accept this.[87]

This seems to imply that Nasr thinks that a non-relativistic approach to religious truth would be incompatible with traditional claims about the wisdom and justice of God. However, it is not unjust for God to allow a tradition to persist in error if either the error is the result of punishable voluntary sin or the error is excusable due to ignorance or inability and will not be punished. On the other hand, it is not contrary to

[87] "Religions and the Concept of the Ultimate," 272.

divine wisdom for God to allow a tradition to persist in error for two thousand years if there is some benefit to creation to be gained by allowing this, even if that benefit is not known to man. Theodicies have often explained the wisdom in God's failure to prevent sin by alluding to the value of voluntary human choice.

The emphasis placed by Nasr on the number of those in error and the length of duration of the error also seems misplaced. Surely such quantitative factors have no bearing on the metaphysical issue at hand.

2. 3. 2. 4. Distinctions

The issue of the existence of conflicting religious views will be further clarified if we keep in mind two aspects of the divine will: the ontological (*takwīnī*) and the legislative (*tashrī'ī*). If Christians have worshipped the Trinity for many centuries, then this must accord with the will of God, but only in the ontological sense. It need not by any means accord with the legislative sense of the divine will. God permits the existence of many things which are contrary to His commands and ordinances, for He permits us to sin. The permission here is purely ontological and does not imply moral or religious permission. From the existence of religious beliefs contrary to Islam, without fallacy one cannot infer that God condones such beliefs.

Further distinctions that must be kept in mind if we are to avoid confusion and fallacy are the difference between containing the truth and being a vehicle of salvation and the difference between each of these and being ordained by God for man in the present age. According to the Qur'ān, all divinely revealed religions contain truth and light, but this does not mean that they are equal; it does not mean that

during the present age they are all suited to bring salvation; and it does not mean that some previously ordained religions have not become divinely proscribed. Nasr seems to betray some confusion with respect to these distinctions when he writes:

> There is many a soul who cannot retain faith in his or her own religion at the expense of considering the followers of all other religions as being damned and who is intelligent enough to detect in the sacred art, doctrines, and rites of other traditions the seal of the Divine.[88]

On the assumption that God has ordained different religions at different periods of history due to the changing social and historical circumstances and given that the sole ordained religion for the current age is Islam, we should also expect the intelligent to detect the seal of the Divine in the previously ordained religions or what remains of them. But the divine origin of a religion must not be mistaken for divine permission to practice that religion today, or to accept the doctrines now associated with that religion. If one accepts a religion of divine origin previously ordained in preference to Islam because of prejudice or a fanatical attachment to one's own cultural traditions, this is rebellion against God and leads to perdition instead of salvation, regardless of the fact that one may be especially attached to the esoteric dimensions of one's favored creed. On the other hand, there is no need to deny that God may grant guidance leading to

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[88] *Religion and the Order of Nature,* 14.

salvation to those who through no fault of their own are unable to accept the truth of Islam. God's infinite mercy is certainly compatible with the fact that He has bestowed the most perfect version of His revelations upon the last of His chosen messengers ﷺ.

2. 3. 2. 5. Why Is There Religious Diversity?

Now we can return to the question of why there is religious diversity. According to Hick, the reason for diversity is that different cultures produce different genuine responses to their confrontations with the Real. According to Nasr, God purposefully manifests Himself in ways appropriate to different cultures in order to be understood in the various cultures, in order to perform functions in accordance with the divine plan at the locale of revelation, and in order to maintain the differences between human communities. Nasr asserts, "The different religions, I believe, are to confirm the separate existence of various human collectivities."[89] In this vein, Schuon contends that there are national or racial predilections for some forms of religious expression.[90] Each divine manifestation or revelation is meant exclusively for a specific community in which it becomes relatively absolute.

While there is much insight in the explanation advanced by Nasr, and while it is certainly an improvement over the cultural relativism suggested by Hick, it fails to lead us completely out of the woods.

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[89] "Religions and the Concept of the Ultimate," 279.

[90] See, for example, his remarks on how Lutheranism is more appropriate than Catholicism for the temperaments of many Germanic peoples in his *Christianity/Islam.*

A more satisfactory explanation of religious diversity would give greater emphasis to the idea that it should be part of the divine plan that successive revelations build upon the spiritual ground won through what had come before. To explain religious diversity, it is not enough to consider differences in cultures and the roles played in the various cultures by the major religions, for this way of looking at things neglects the dynamic element in human spirituality and religion. As history unfolds and cultures evolve and degenerate, the prospects for the human appreciation of various forms of divine revelation will change. So, instead of explaining religious diversity analogously to ethnic diversity, as Hick does; we should follow the lead of Nasr and Schuon and seek to explain religious diversity as required by differences in manifestation which God arranges to accord with cultural differences, but then we should go further and seek to understand these differences in manifestation as part of a historical process through which God realizes His plan for humanity. Spiritual wayfaring is not a journey for individuals alone, for human spirituality as such has a course to follow; and if, as the *sophia perennis* suggests, there are cycles in this course, patterns that repeat themselves, there can be ascension, as well. We need not be running around in mere circles; it may be that God calls on us to look with greater insight to His signs each time they are repeated so that we might spiral upward toward Him.

2. 3. 2. 6. Seven Reasons to Deny the Cultural Relativity of Religion

The claim that divine manifestations are meant by God exclusively for the specific communities in which they appear is incompatible with the following facts:

(1) cultural diversity within religions, (2) religious diversity within cultures, (3) the phenomenon of conversion, (4) revealed claims to universality, (5) revealed invitation to members of other communities to join the new faith, (6) doctrinal contradictions between religions, and (7) practical contradictions between religions. More specifically, as these facts pertain to Islam they appear to be incompatible with the explanation of religious diversity offered by Nasr.

2. 3. 2. 6. 1. Cultural Diversity Within Religions

Cultural diversity comes to exist within a single religious community as that community spreads geographically and is extended over different periods of human history. Nasr attempts to explain the elements of love and sacrifice in Christianity as divine responses to the Greco-Roman heritage of sophism and skepticism during the period leading up to the birth of Christ[ع]. However, Christianity has taken root in times and places where the Greco-Roman legacy has little or no influence. Islam thrives in Indonesia just as well as in Egypt, and over periods of time when the major cultural influences have altered radically. These cultural differences within religious communities are at least as great as the differences which occur between religious communities. Hence, diversity among religions cannot be explained solely in terms of the need to preserve distinct cultures or to serve some limited cultural aim.

2. 3. 2. 6. 2. Religious Diversity Within Cultures

Likewise, within a single cultural milieu there may be very different forms of religious life. Jews and Christians in New York participate in a common culture influenced largely by consumerism and the

entertainment industries, although their theological perspectives remain quite different and exhibit no tendency to merge into a single Judeo-Christian sect. So, the religious diversity in New York which exists between Jews and Christians cannot be explained in terms of God's need to address people of different cultures differently. New York, of course, is merely one example among many in which religious differences cut across a single culture.

2. 3. 2. 6. 3. Conversion

As someone who has converted to Islam, I personally take offense to the suggestion that religious affiliation is to be understood as similar to ethnicity. Although it sometimes happens that the members of a religious community will fail to propagate their faith except by reproduction, this is generally a mark of degradation in the community whose faith teaches that its truths have been revealed for all mankind. As contemporary men and women begin to shrug off the illusions of communism and atheistic humanism and wake up to the living religious communities around them, they will have to make difficult choices about religious commitments with which considerations of personal ancestry can provide no standard. If the vast majority of men content themselves with what is familiar to them, the fact that this practice is widespread is no justification for it.

The fact that conversions do take place provides ample evidence for the fact that people are capable of making judgments about the comparative merits of different religions. Of course, this is not to say that those who convert always have good reasons to support their choices. As people all around the world are becoming more informed about religious

traditions, conversions are taking place with increased frequency. In America since the 1960's, religious communities have been set up and sustained by American converts to various forms of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. New forms of Christianity have also won converts. Conversion need not involve a crossing from one religious tradition to another. Christians appropriately refer to the commitments of those said to be "born again" as conversions. As conversions of different sorts become more common, seekers must attempt to avoid error by using a combination of reason and insight the like of which is generally valued in coming to weighty decisions and evaluating competing claims. No one wants his or her own religious conversion to be frivolous.

Buddhism, Christianity and Islam have begun their careers with invitations and conversions, and so have many denominations within these and other religious traditions. Conversion often involves entrance into a community to which one had been alien. If such conversion is ever valid, the message of revelation cannot be interpreted as being intended exclusively for those within the community.

2. 3. 2. 6. 4. Revealed Claims To Universality

At least in the case of Islam, the universal proclamation is plain. The Qur'ān is not a mere dead letter of historical interest pertaining to seventh century Arabia. It speaks to all who would engage its text:

﴿هو الذى أرسل رسوله بالهدى و دين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله و لو كره المشركون﴾

﴿*It is He Who sent His Apostle with guidance and the religion of the Truth, that He may cause it to prevail over all religions, even if the idolaters detest it.*﴾ (9:33)[91]

To read these words as having only a relatively absolute meaning and not an absolutely absolute meaning deprives contemporary Muslims from being guided by the Qur'ān. If the words, "to prevail over all religions," are interpreted as meaning all religions in the world of seventh century Arabian culture alone, then the Qur'ān ceases to speak to us today. Furthermore, such an interpretation does not seem consistent with the understanding of the Prophet[ص] himself. For he sent emissaries to distant lands inviting those there to Islam (see below). The mission entrusted to the Prophet of Islam[ص] is universal:

﴿و ما ارسلناك الا كافّة للنّاس بشيراً و نذيراً و لكن اكثر الناس لا يعلمون﴾

﴿*And We have not sent yo.. but to all people as a bearer of good news and as a warner, but most people do not know.*﴾ (34:28)[92]

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[91] Similar to this are (48:28) and (61:9). Also see (2:193), (8:39), and (3:19).

[92] According to some interpreters, the following verse also illustrates this point:

﴿انّما أنت منذر و لكل قوم هاد﴾

﴿Thou art only a warner, and a guide to every people.﴾ (13:7) The translation given is that of A. J. Arberry, but other translators and exegites have interpreted the ...

The Qur'ān itself, though revealed more than fourteen centuries ago, has reached us today, and speaks to us, inviting us to Islam and forbidding us from taking up other ways:

﴿و ان هذا صراطی مستقیماً فاتبعوه و لا تتبعوا السبل فتفرّق بکم عن سبیله ذلکم وصّاکم به لعلکم تتقون﴾

﴿*And verily this is My path, the straight one, so follow it and do not follow other paths for they will scatter you from His path; this He enjoins upon you that you may be wary.*﴾ (6:154)

2. 3. 2. 6. 5. The Invitation to Others

The Qur'ān enjoins the believers to invite others to the faith, and cautions against pointless disputing with them. Different revelations had been given to different peoples, but they are expected to recognize the divine source of Islam and to heed its invitation.

﴿لکل امة جعلنا منسکا هم ناسکوه فلا ینازعنك فی الامر و ادع الی ربك انك لعلی هدی مستقیم﴾

﴿*Unto every people have We prescribed the rites of devotion which they observe, so they should not dispute with*

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conjunction in such a way the translation would be "You are only a warner, and for every people there is a guide." There are commentaries on this verse attributed to the Imams according to which the function of warning is attributed to the Prophet ﷺ and guidance is attributed to Imam 'Ali ﷺ, for which see 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'i's *Al-Mizān*.

you about the affair, and call unto your Lord. Indeed, you are on the right way.﴾ (22:67)

What is of interest in this verse is that despite the affirmation of the fact that the rites of different peoples have been divinely prescribed, they are not to dispute with the Prophetﷺ about such things, and he is ordered to call them to the Lord. So, the Prophetﷺ is to call people to whom previous rites were prescribed and they are not to argue with him about it.

﴿و كذلك جعلنكم امة وسطا لتكونوا شهدآء على النس و يكون الرسول عليكم شهيداً﴾

﴿*And thus have We made you a group of middling stand that you may be witnesses unto mankind and the Prophet be a witness unto you;*﴾ (2:143)[93]

Here the universality of Islam is implied by the idea that the Muslims are to bear witness to all mankind, rather than to the people of a specific time or place. If it is objected that what is meant by "mankind" here is restricted to those who lived in the time and environs of the Prophetﷺ, the following āyah makes it clear that the warning is intended not merely for those addressed by Prophetﷺ, but for all to whom the message of the Qur'ān reaches, regardless of cultural background:

﴿قل الله شهيد بينى و بينكم و اوحى الىّ هذا القران لانذركم به و من بلغ﴾

[93] Also see (16:125), (42:15), and (28:87).

﴿*Say: God is witness between me and you; and this Qur'ān has been revealed to me that I may warn you with it and whomsoever it reaches*﴾ (6:19)

In addition to exhortations to warn and invite others, the Qur'ān itself directly addresses the Jews and Christians, calling upon them to embrace the final revelation of God.[94] The Qur'ān presents itself as the final revelation to pronounce judgment over that about which those communities to whom revelations had previously been given have come to disagree. These verses display an historical awareness incompatible with the idea that each of the religions forms its own separate community destined by God to remain in isolation from the others. Those of understanding from each religious community are invited to accept Islam as the culmination of that which they already believe.

If the revelation of Islam itself seeks to trespass over the ground claimed for other religions, it cannot be properly understood relativistically as confining itself to a single cultural world. Further proof that the message of the Qur'ān is addressed to humanity in its totality, and not only the humanity at large in seventh century Arabia, may be found in the Prophet's ﷺ own understanding of his mission, expressed in his dispatch of emissaries to Byzantium and Persia with letters proclaiming the universal call to Islam.

Consider, for example, the following letter reportedly sent to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius:

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[94] The People of the Book are directly called upon at (3:64), (3:70), (3:98), (4:47), (4:171), (5:15) and (5:77) and many other verses. The Jews are directly addressed at (62:6).

In the Name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate
From: Muḥammad, servant of Allah and His prophet.
To: Heraclius the Great of Byzantium.
Peace be to those who follow guidance.

I invite you with the invitation of Islam. If you submit it is to your benefit, for if you submit Allah will give you two rewards. If you turn this down, then upon you will be the error of your peasants. ﴿*O People of the Book! Come to a word between us and between you that we worship none but Allah and shall not associate anything with Him and some of us shall not take others for lords other than Allah. And if they turn back, then say: Bear witness that we are Muslims.*﴾[95]

[Seal:] Allah
Rasūl
Muḥammad[96]

Not only does this letter show that the Prophet understood his calling as a universal mission, not to be confined to any particular cultural context, it also shows that he understood the message of the Qur'ān to be likewise universal, speaking not only to the People

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[95] (3:64).

[96] My translation from Muḥammad Ḥamidullah's collection, *Al-Wathā'iq al-siyāsiyyah* (Beirut: Dar al-nafās, 1987), 107-110.

of the Book on the Arabian peninsula, but in distant lands as well.

2. 3. 2. 6. 6. Doctrinal Contradictions

One of the major problems faced by any form of pluralism, including the form of pluralism accepted in the Qur'ān, according to which various religions were sent by Allah to His messengers in different times and places, is what to make of the apparent contradictions among the creeds of the different religions. This is the problem referred to above as *alethic religious pluralism.* Various means to resolve the contradictions are suggested in the Qur'ān itself. There is the claim that adulteration of the original revelations has taken place, both purposefully and due to forgetfulness.[97] It is also claimed that what was revealed to the different prophets was the same, so that the contradictions among creeds must be due to content apart from what was revealed.[98] Religious differences are generally explained in the Qur'ān as having arisen from sin: from pride in the partial truth each of the different groups has possessed and from envy.[99] What is not found in the Qur'ān is the claim that the differences in religious creeds and their splitting into sects is a matter of indifference, or that it is a mere effect of cultural differences like differences among languages.

The explanation given by Hick for conflicts in doctrinal statements is that they arise from different ways of reacting to the Ultimate Reality.

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[97] See (2:75), (3:78), (5:13), (5:41).
[98] See (2:136), (3:84), (4:150), (42:13-14).
[99] See (3:18), (23:53), (30:32), (42:14).

Contradictions among these claims are to be minimized through the recognition of their cultural relativity, and it is only the absolute forms of doctrinal statements that seem to be in conflict with this relativism which need to be revised. It is for this reason that Hick is willing to call for a reform of Christianity with the claim that Christ should not be identified with God as the Second Person of the Trinity, who sacrificed his human life so that men may be saved from sin. Hick is willing to reform such aspects of Christianity because he considers them to be incompatible with the relativity of religious truth and with the idea that salvation is possible outside Christianity.

For Nasr, on the other hand, contradictions among different religious doctrines are explained by the hypothesis that God has revealed Himself in contradictory ways in different cultural settings. Truth becomes relative, for Nasr, not according to the measure of man, but according to the variations in the divine measure.

Contradictions among the doctrinal claims of different religions may occur on various levels. Sometimes the differences are speculative. Different sects may associate themselves with different theories of the divine attributes, or human freedom, or salvation, etc. These sorts of differences can be quite disruptive and have sometimes led to sectarian splits, such as the split between Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites over divine justice, or the disagreement between Lutherans and Calvinists over the real presence of Christ in the eucharist, but reconciliation in such matters, even if precluded by entrenched commitments, are not inconceivable. Some differences, however, are so fundamental and concern elements of creed so essential that reconciliation

seems impossible. Such is the difference between Christians and Muslims about the crucifixion. It is a matter of objective historical fact that Christ did not die on the cross or that he did die on the cross. For the vast majority of Christian denominations, the crucifixion is a necessary element of Christianity whose historical reality is taken to be established way beyond any reasonable doubt. Muslims, on the other hand, must deny the crucifixion because this denial is directly revealed by God in the Qur'an.

Dr. Nasr, however, holds out hope for reconciliation even here, although the price to be paid is a rather extreme form of relativism about the truth. No one will have any trouble understanding that according to Christians the crucifixion truly did occur and according to Muslims it did not. This uncontroversial fact may be expressed in a rather misleading way when one intends to convey this point by saying that the proposition that the crucifixion occurred is true for Christians and false for Muslims. Here the expression "true for X" should be interpreted as meaning "true according to X" or "true in X's opinion". But what Nasr intends is something much more controversial. He offers an analogy with perception. Things look different from different angles. The example he gives is that of listening to a piece of music by Bach. It will mean different things for people with different backgrounds. But the question at hand is not how the events that took place at Calvary are to be interpreted, rather there is disagreement about the historical events themselves. Sometimes the occurrence of events may depend upon perspective, as thunder may be said to have crashed loudly or murmured softly depending on the place from which it is heard. According to Einstein's theory of relativity, simultaneity is not an objective fact, but

depends on the perspective from which it is described. According to what Nasr says, religious truth must be something like Einstein's simultaneity. Given his dismissive attitude toward the historical documentation to which Hick refers in support of his claim that Jesus did not believe he was God, Nasr seems to think that the historical events at Calvary do not determine the truth of the religious claims about what did or did not happen there.[100] Here Nasr joins company with the founder of neo-orthodox Christian theology, Karl Barth, who held that the truth of Christianity is completely independent of the historical truth of the events described in the Bible.

So, when we ask whether Christ really died on the cross, Nasr will respond that from his own perspective as a Muslim, the answer is no, but that it is equally correct that the answer is yet from the perspective of Christianity. From the perspective of objective history, it is not possible to gather enough evidence to decide the issue one way or another, but even if it could be shown definitively exactly what happened at Calvary, what would be shown would be a mere worldly truth that could in no way nullify either of the religious truths taught by Christianity or Islam.

This sort of relativism is either implausible or detrimental. If the sole reason for accepting the account sketched of religious truth is to remove apparent contradictions among religions, it becomes implausible because it is question begging. We are to

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[100] Even Adnan Aslan, who otherwise ardently supports the postion of Dr. Nasr, cannot swallow this. See the conclusion of his *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy* (Surrey: Curzon, 1998).

believe that all the religions are saying the same thing in essence, yet whenever there appears to be evidence to the contrary in the form of contradictory truth claims, we are told that religious truth is relative. Even if independent reasons for a Barthian approach to religious truth are accepted and extended so as to validate all the major religions, the relativism thus won will be detrimental to religion itself, as the critics of Barth have pointed out.[101] In order for religion to engage itself with the world, its truths must be worldly truths as well as divine, and in order for religion to assert the supremacy of the divine truths in its revelation over human opinion, the statement of these truths as revelation must weigh more heavily than secular standards of historical evidence will allow. It is not enough to give divine statements a lofty position within the religious language game. Engagement with religion requires that religious truth spill over to re-orient any other game we might like to play.

If realism about religious truth is abandoned, we seem to be left with nothing but sacred myths. If religion does not speak the absolute truth, if it is reduced to a set of collections of edifying and even enlightening stories, the urgency of the religious call will be lost.

It is important to see exactly where the difficulty in the relativist position occurs. The naive reaction is to firmly assert that logic prohibits the truth of contradictories, and hence that the conflicting claims made by Muslims and Christians cannot all be true. The relativist, however, expects this reaction and has a

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[101] See Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992).

ready response: religious claims are not true or false simpliciter, rather they are true or false only relative to some interpretive religious framework, just as some succession of sounds may form a true sentence in one language and a false sentence in another. The proper rejoinder of the theological realist should not be that such a position is incoherent, but rather that there is no good reason to accept it, and that it conflicts with religious self-understanding. When Christians and Muslims disagree about what happened on Calvary, they do not mean that they merely have different parables in their respective traditions, but that they have different ideas about a single historical truth.

Finally, the locus of the relativist position is questionable. The relativist seems to view all the religions from outside and from that neutral vantage sees that they are all relatively true. For the proponents of *sophia perennis* the neutral vantage point is the esoteric dimension of all religions, which is unique. However, there is no access to the esoteric dimension independent of the exoteric aspects of each religion; and this is a point Schuon and Nasr seem prepared to accept. Now, if we cannot make any authoritative claims about the esoteric truth of religion in general except relative to an exoteric tradition, contradictions in doctrine will not cancel out in a neutral interior of the essence of religion. We cannot say that from the point of view of the esoteric perennial truth it is neither true nor false that Christ died on the cross, for we cannot make statements on behalf of the esoteric unless through the vehicle of the exoteric. From the point of view of the interior of Islam, we may be able to reach an understanding of the spiritual significance within Christianity of the redemptive suffering of Jesus[c], but ultimately, the Christian view will be seen as flawed. God may even

guide Christians to Himself through the very misapprehensions that flaw Christianity, but the perfection of the spiritual truths which do remain at the esoteric level in Christian faith are to be found in esoteric Islam rather than in generic esoterica.

When we see that conflicts in exoteric doctrine have reverberations in the esoteric aspects of the religions, we must also see that doctrinal differences cannot be as easily discarded as the rind of an orange. Differences in the nature of the rinds of oranges, lemons and limes are signs that the fruits inside also differ. Doctrinal conflicts occur precisely because religions are not each addressed exclusively to a single community. If the differences were confined to culturally relative matters, there would be no possibility of contradiction, just as there is no contradiction between the claims that verbs generally precede their objects in English, and tend to follow them in Persian. When doctrinal differences take the form of contradiction, this indicates that the proponents of each term of the contradiction disagree. Each implicitly claims that the way the other sees things is wrong; and to confine the differences exhibited by the religions to their exoteric dimensions is to fail to appreciate that exoteric differences can have esoteric implications. Allowance should be made that views expressed within the various religious traditions of the world may, after all, be profound. To relativize all doctrinal differences to cultural or communal differences is to confine these differences to a superficiality which is denied by the religions at both esoteric and exoteric levels.

2. 3. 2. 6. 7. Practical Contradictions

No less important than the doctrinal contradictions among religious traditions are the practical contradictions. One religion orders its followers to abstain from meat, while another demands ritual animal sacrifice. Islam demands prayer in the direction of Mecca, while Christianity pays no attention to the issue of geographical direction. The issue of the direction of prayer is especially helpful for clarifying the position of Islam with regard to the plurality of religions.[102] The change in *qiblah* from Jerusalem to Mecca marks a turning point in the revelation of Islam at which the Muslims became clearly distinct from the Jews and Christians of Madina, who were invited to accept the new revelation and its Prophet ﷺ. At the same time, it is admitted that each *qiblah* has had its own validity. Prayers offered by the Muslims facing Jerusalem prior to the change in *qiblah* were not in vain, and we are repeatedly reminded that God is not confined to any particular direction. The East and West belong to Him, and wherever you turn, there is the face of God.[103] Nevertheless, God obliges His servants to face Mecca.

The point made here applies not only to the direction of prayer, but to the practical orientation of the religious life in general. Ways of life other than those commanded by Islam were previously ordained, and they were valid ways for reaching God. In another sense, we are led to God no matter what way of life we follow, for ultimately we are brought before Him to be judged. Different ways of life, however, have been deemed appropriate at different times and in

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[102] See (2:142) ff.
[103] (2:115).

different cultures in response to the needs for which God appointed His various prophets. Islam, however, in the final form in which it has been revealed, is not to be superseded in the course of time nor confined to a specific corner of the globe. It is sufficiently flexible to apply to all peoples. It is the only major religion whose founding revelation remains in tact. Its basic practical commandments are not difficult to understand, and this path that it prescribes is one to which it invites all humanity.

Practical differences among cultures often are best explained relativistically. There are many ways in which respect may be shown to others, but these ways often depend on their being understood as such through social conventions. What is considered a sign of respect in one culture might cause offense in another. The practical differences between the prescriptions of Islam and those of other religions, however, run deeper than this. There are disagreements about the way we should conduct ourselves in worship and in our relations with others. These disagreements are not treated in the Qur'ān as being of no consequence. Instead we are told that among the children of Adam some communities are rightly guided and some have gone astray.[104]

Thus we find that the practical disagreements among religions, no less than their doctrinal contradictions, indicate that the differences among them are more than cultural variants. There are substantial differences between the ways of life allowed by Islam and those condoned in modern Christian societies. If we were to accept an

[104] (7:30).

explanation of these differences in terms of differences in temperament and cultural environment, the law of Islam would lose its moral force. The prescriptions of *shari'ah* provide guidance for the best way to live for all humanity. Other ways may be tolerated within the framework of the Islamic polity, as *dhimmis* have been given a large degree of latitude enabling them to live in accordance with their own laws. But Islam does not proclaim that it is a matter of indifference as to which law, Jewish, Christian or Muslim, one is to follow. Islam prescribes tolerance for other ways at the same time that it proclaims its own way as commanded by God.

Unfortunately, Jews, Christians and Muslims have been—and often continue to be—intolerant of one another. The remedy to this malady is not to stand back and claim that it does not matter which way one follows because all have been divinely ordained, as Nasr seems to suggest; nor can Muslims accept the remedy offered by Hick of a tolerance based on the idea that all the religions are mere human responses to the divine. Hick brings up the issue of religious war as a practical reason to accept religious pluralism, and the response given by Nasr is that most wars of the twentieth century have arisen from secular rather than religious ideologies. Granting the point made by Nasr, we cannot deny that religious intolerance poses the threat of violence. In the face of this danger, however, it is neither correct nor sufficient to claim that no religious supremacy is sanctioned by God. It is not correct for the theological reasons given above, that is, Islam emphatically proclaims its own supremacy to the other religions as the culmination of the divine guidance previously sent. It is not sufficient because true religious tolerance will only be achieved when men learn to respect the religious

beliefs of those they consider to be mistaken. The key to tolerance is not the removal or relativization of disagreement, but the willingness to accept genuine disagreement. For Muslims, any effective remedy to intolerance must be found in Islam itself, that is, the remedy is submission to the Will of God. We must learn to better appreciate and respect the tolerance prescribed by Islam if we are to be worthy of calling ourselves Muslims.

2. 3. 3. Conclusions

Nasr calls attention to the difference between the modern perspective on religion and the perspective internal to the religions themselves. It is from the modern perspective that the relativism of religious claims is enunciated. Here we find a clash between the modern and the religious viewpoints. Each makes a claim to ultimacy. The basis for the modern perspective defended by Nasr is insight into the esoteric dimensions of the religions of the world, but it remains a human insight and speculation. The basis for the perspective internal to Islam, on the other hand, is divine revelation. To claim that the answer to modern questions about the religions is to be found in human speculative thought rather than in revelation is to weaken the absolute authority of revelation in a way that threatens the ability of divine guidance to pour forth from revelation. The Qur'ān gives its own reasons for the rejection of Islam: pride, envy, stubborn attachment to tradition, and deviation from previously revealed truths. Nowhere do we find the idea that God ordained a refusal to accept Islam in order to preserve communities separate from the *ummah*.

The traditional perspective found in Islamic thought that is lauded by Nasr does not itself provide any reason for the glorification of the traditional qua traditional. The characterization of a way or creed as traditional satisfies no criteria for rightness or truth. While much that is correct and true is to be found in the religious traditions of mankind, it is not in virtue of being traditional that ways and creeds become right and true, although in the historical processes through which traditions are formed we should expect the elimination of much that is wrong, and the achievement of genuine wisdom. If being traditional is no criterion for what is right and true, what are the proper criteria? Hick's answer is that there are two standards for grading religions: first, the religion must be effective in turning its followers from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness; second, the religion must promote good morals. Hick finds no reason to think that these criteria should not be satisfied by a Christianity purged of it traditional doctrines of the Incarnation and Redemption. The response by Nasr to this proposal is that the result would be a break with Christian tradition rather than its reform. In this response, it appears that Nasr wishes to use tradition itself as a standard for measuring religions. Nasr seems to come closer to the truth when he admits that there are levels of understanding. Instead of looking for a rigid formulation of a criteria to be used for assessing religious claims, we might do better to seek a process by which wisdom is achieved and truth uncovered. To recognize the divine, we are not to require the divine to conform to our preconceived notions; rather, we must purify ourselves of all base elements that may cloud our vision.

Although I have expressed grave misgivings about religious pluralism as defended by Hick and Nasr, I must also admit some misgivings about my own criticisms. John Hick, of all contemporary Christian theologians, seems to come closest to the formulation of a Christology consistent with that of Islam. While Christians have taught that Jesus gave up his humanity on the cross to save the world, Hick argues that Christians must give up the divinity of Jesus in order to recognize the salvation made possible through the plurality of the world's religions. So, whatever the failings of the program of religious pluralism he has advanced, Hick deserves some recognition and encouragement for his attempts to reform Christian teachings.

The root of the failure of Hick's pluralism is that it makes religion into a purely human response to the divine, or the Ultimate Reality, while Islam teaches that religion is divinely revealed. This point also lies at the heart of the criticism Nasr presents to Hick; but Nasr seems to fall short of allowing revelation the absolute status it must possess if it is really understood as nothing less than God's direct communication to humanity.

On the other hand, Dr. Nasr is such a brilliant exponent of Islamic thought in the West that I cannot find fault with his views without feelings of trepidation. Perhaps I have not understood him correctly, or perhaps the views he expressed in the interview were not as well considered as those he would have put in writing himself. Maybe a satisfactory answer to the criticisms I have raised can be found in the teachings of perennial philosophy. There is an interesting suggestion in Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. There he claims that

every Revelation has the function of an esoterism in relation to the previous religious form.

> Christianity, for example, is esoteric relative to the Judaic form and Islam relatively to the Judaic and Christian forms, though this is, of course, only valid when regarded from the special point of view that we are here considering and would be quite false if understood literally. Moreover, insofar as Islam is distinguished by its form from the other two monotheistic religions, that is, insofar as it is formally limited, these religions also possess an esoteric aspect relatively to it, and the same reversibility of relationship applies as between Christianity and Judaism. However, the relationship to which we referred first is a more direct one that the second, since it was Islam that, in the name of the spirit, shattered the forms that preceded it, and Christianity that shattered the Judaic form, and not the other way around.[105]

Here, at least, some grounds are given for the precedence of Islam over its predecessors. Islam not only shatters previous forms in the name of the spirit, however, it also imposes its own form in place of

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[105] Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 29.

those it has shattered. It is that form, or exterior, which constitutes the gateway to its spirit, or interior, which, by virtue of its content and the position of Islam in the line of succession of revealed religions, is more comprehensive than any other. Furthermore, Islam does not violate the truths of the previously revealed religions; rather it confirms them. What Islam shatters is what is false in the other religions because of corruption and deviation or because of the temporal limitations of their validity:

﴿بل نقذف بالحقّ على الباطل فيدمغه فإذا هو زاهق و لكم الويل مما تصفون﴾

﴿Nay, but We hurl the Truth against falsehood so that it shatters its head and it disappears; and woe unto you for what you attribute [to Him].﴾

(21:18)

2. 4. *The Rejection of Religious Pluralism by Muslim Philosophers*

Another line of thought about the diversity of religions is to be found in the tradition of Islamic philosophy. After explaining that the common people whom the prophets sought to guide are not capable of appreciating philosophical wisdom, Fārābī writes: "These things are thus allegorized for every nation or people in terms familiar to them, and it is possible that what is familiar to one people is foreign to another."[106] In Fārābī's view, which is to a great extent accepted by Ibn Sīnā, the religions all express a single philosophical truth in different symbols and through these symbols serve to organize society and lead humanity to felicity. Furthermore, each great religion contains, in its corpus of revelations, "sufficient glimpses of pure truth to lead the elect seekers of truth to pursue this truth itself and to be able to allegorically interpret the rest of the symbols."[107] According to Fārābī, the spiritual content and background of all religion is identical, since this is universal, but it is equally true that the symbols employed by the religions are not at the same level. Because of this some religions are "nearer to the truth than others, some are more adequate than others in leading humanity to the higher truth, some, again, are more effective than others in gaining the belief of people and becoming the directive force of their lives. Indeed

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[106] From his *Siyāsat*, cited and translated by Fazlur Rahman in his *Prophecy in Islam* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958), 40.

[107] Fazlur Rahman, *ibid.*, 40.

there are religions whose symbolisms are positively harmful."[108]

Like the sufi position on the diversity of religions, nothing in the position of the philosophers contradicts the ideas emphasized by the theologians that in the present age the sole religion prescribed by God for mankind is Islam, that the previously revealed religions have become corrupted, that the beliefs associated with them differ from what was revealed to their prophets, and that Islam is the culmination of all previously revealed religions. Where the *'urafā* and the *falsūf* differ is on how to understand the interior (*bāṭin*) of the revealed religions, through spiritual unveilings or through philosophical argument. What is most notable for its absence is the sort of view advocated by reductive religious pluralism, according to which religions are validated by personal religious experience, that since all the religions express a single interior truth it makes no difference which is followed, and that the common truth of the world's religions in their contemporary forms are sufficient as guides to ultimate felicity. None of these essential elements of reductive religious pluralism would be accepted by the theologian, the sufi or the philosopher.

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[108] *Ibid.*, 41. A view similar to Fārābi's is endorsed by Ibn Sinā in his *Risālah al-Aḍḥawiya.*

2. 5. *Religious Pluralism and the Muslim Theologians*

Given that in the present age, only one religion is ordained by God for mankind and in this sense only one religion is valid or correct, namely the religion revealed to the last of His chosen messengers, Muḥammad, may the Peace and blessings of Allah be with him and with his folk, there remains the question of who is destined for heaven and who for the fire of hell, and whether damnation will be eternal or not for the adherents of any particular faith. This topic is discussed in detail in the final chapter of Shahīd Muṭahharī's *'Adl Ilāhī (Divine Justice)*, in which he is primarily concerned with a defense of soteriological pluralism in the context of Islamic theology, and the position defended below is for the most part the same.[109]

The first thing that needs to be understood before an assessment can be made of whether non-believers can attain paradise is that disbelief itself is a major sin warranting eternal damnation. The verses of the Noble Qur'ān attesting to this judgment are too numerous to mention, but the following are representative:

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[109] Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, *'Adl Ilāhī*, 10th printing (Qom: Intishārāt Ṣadrā, 1357/1978), 287-381. I have also benefitted from discussions with Ayatullah Javādi 'Amulī, Āqāye Muṣṭafāpūr, Āqāye Ḥusaynzādeh, Āqāye Muḥammad Bāqir Kharāzi, Āqāye Qomī, and others, although the position defended here is not to be attributed to any of them, and I bear the responsibility for whatever errors the position contains. May Allah forgive us for our shortcomings, and bless us with knowledge from Him!

﴿*and those who disbelieve, for them shall be the drink from the boiling fluids and a painful chastisement for that they disbelieved.*﴾ (10:4)

﴿*And whoever acts hostilely to the Apostle after guidance has become manifest to him, and follows other than the way of the believers, We will turn him to that to which he has turned and make him enter Hell; and it is an evil resort.*﴾ (4:115)

These and similar verses issue a threat to the infidel, so to understand them properly, we need to examine three issues: (1) to precisely whom the threat is issued, (2) under what conditions it is issued and (3) whether it must be carried out.

2. 5. 1. Infidelity

The threat of damnation is not issued exclusively to the infidels; rather, it is issued to all mankind, and infidelity is stated as a condition whose recompense is hell. However, because of its importance as the primary condition for damnation under discussion, several points should be noted about the concept of infidelity before any other conditions regarding the damnation of the infidels are considered.

The term infidelity (*kufr*), and its cognates, such as infidel (*kāfir*), have different meanings in different contexts. For example, there is a legal definition used with regard to such issues as inheritance and marriage. It cannot be assumed, however, that in every verse in which these terms occur the legal definition gives the appropriate meaning. Even in different legal contexts, the meaning can differ. For example, the injunction to slay the disbelievers in time of war is generally interpreted as pertaining to combatant disbelievers,

and not to women, children and the infirm. Some exegetes have claimed that legal condemnations of the pagans (*mushriqin*) in the Qur'ān pertain only to the pagans of the Arabian peninsula during the time of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, while others have offered broader interpretations.

The legal definitions of infidelity are not relevant to the question of salvation, for the legal definitions pertain to issues concerning how non-Muslims are to be treated according to Islamic law, while the question of salvation pertains to the inner state of the individual.

The literal meaning of infidelity (*kufr*) is covering. The infidel is one who seeks to shield or cover himself from the truth of Islam. Infidelity is not a passive condition applying to all those who lack correct belief in Islam, rather it is an active inward opposition which prevents a person from accepting divine guidance. What damns the infidel is his own interior defiance of God and rejection of the divine guidance He sent through His prophets ﷺ. His own infidelity veils the infidel from God, and it is this separation which is damnation.

2. 5. 2. Conditions

The Shi'i theologians generally agree that the threat of damnation does not apply to all who lack correct belief. The obvious exceptions are children who have not reached the age of reason, the insane and feeble minded. Other groups exempt from the threat of damnation for their incorrect beliefs mentioned in narrations are the deaf and dumb and those who died

between the periods in which prophets were sent.[110] There is disagreement about exactly what is to happen to these groups, called incapable (*qāṣir*), in the afterlife. According to some narrations, there will be a trial on the Last Day for these people in which a prophet will be sent to them and will call them from within a fire. Those who enter the fire will be saved and those who do not will enter the fire of hell. Shaykh Ṣadūq, however, rejects these narrations on the grounds that they conflict with others according to which there are no responsibilities on the Day of Judgment. Others claim that those who were incapable in this world are an exception. According to Fayḍ Kāshānī, the call from the fire is to be understood as the reflection in the other world of the trial in this world to live righteously, and the call of the prophet from the fire is the other worldly form of the call of moral conscience in this world.[111] In any case, there is general agreement among the Shī'ī scholars that the groups mentioned above may be spared from damnation despite their incorrect beliefs.

Those called incapable (*qāṣir*) are distinguished from the negligent (*muqaṣṣir*), who have incorrect beliefs through their own fault, because of prejudice, dogmatism, pride, laziness, and the like. Shahīd Mutahharī's solution to the problem of religious pluralism is based on this distinction, however, he expands the category of the incapable to include all those who are unable through no fault of their own to admit the truth of Islam. Those who are incapable

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[110] See *Biḥār al-Anwār*, Vol. 5, p. 289.

[111] See Fayḍ Kāshānī, *'Ilm al-Yaqīn*, Vol. 2, (Qom: Bīdār), p. 1054.

may be divided into two groups: those who lack the mental capacity to discern the truth and those to whom the truth is not made manifest, although they are fully rational. The first group includes children, the insane and feeble minded. Of greater interest, however, is the second group, which includes the deaf and those born between prophets, to which Shahīd Mutahharī adds those whom he calls *mustaḍ'af*, those made unfortunate either by oppression or other circumstances.

The extension of the class of the incapable is a natural result of rational reflection on the groups mentioned in the narrations. It is not deafness, per se, which excuses a person from heeding the call of Islam, but the result presumed to follow from deafness in centuries past, that the deaf would not be expected to have become familiar with the teachings of Islam. If the deaf person, however, is able to read or sign and the person is educated and the teachings of Islam are made known to him, then he will become responsible for accepting or rejecting the truth. What is at issue is the manifestation of the truth, not deafness, as is indicated in the noble verse quoted above, in the phrase ﴿*after guidance has become manifested to him*﴾ (4:115). This is the central condition for responsible choice of creed.

Likewise, those who were born between prophets are presumed to lack knowledge of the divine message they brought. But if such a person were a scholar and understood what had been previously revealed, it would be incumbent upon him to heed the divine call. On the other hand, one born in the present age, but in a remote area of the world to which the teachings of Islam had not reached, cannot be held accountable for his failure to embrace Islam.

Shahīd Mutahharī extends this point to cover those who for any reason (for which they themselves cannot be held responsible) are unable to understand the message of Islam. Someone who has been brought up in an atmosphere poisoned by propaganda spread by the enemies of Islam may be no more capable of understanding the message of Islam than one living in a remote region physically cut off from all contact with the Islamic world. Even if that person is a scholar for whom a library of books about Islam is available, still the comprehension of the message of Islam for such a person may be as difficult as for those who lack the requisite mental health.

Perhaps those whom Shahīd Mutahharī castigates as "narrow minded dry holy ones" (*tang naẓarī khoshk muqaddasān*) will argue on the basis of the following noble verse that if one really sought the truth, God would somehow show the way to Islam (in the specific sense): ﴿*And those who strive hard in Us, certainly We guide them in Our ways*﴾ (29:69) However, such a conclusion cannot validly be drawn from this verse for two reasons. First, the guidance God may provide to the true seekers may be moral wisdom without the ability to arrive at information about the revelation given to the last of His prophets ﷺ, as God may guide and grant wisdom to those who sincerely seek but who live in regions where the message of Islam has not reached. Second, it is not clear that the phrase "those who strive hard in us" is to be interpreted so as to include all sincere searchers, for similar words are used in the Qur'ān in various placed with a much more narrow meaning to

signify only those who were already true believers and had struggled on behalf of Islam.[112]

Shahid Mutahhari argues that salvation is not a matter of an arbitrary decision by God, but is the natural result of one's life. It is not conventional (*qarārdādī*), but ontological (*takwīnī*). He also emphasizes that both salvation and damnation come in various degrees, and that the latter is not always eternal. Likewise, Islam itself comes in degrees from the innate desire for truth and goodness found at least latently in all human beings to the faith and righteousness of the special friends of Allah, the *awliyā*. No one is locked out of heaven because they fail to subscribe to the right creed; but some incorrect beliefs can prevent one from effectively purifying oneself, and thus, indirectly, lead to wretchedness.[113] Thus, in Islam we find a rationale for insistence on right belief as that which guides one toward felicity, while at the same time there need not be any rigid exclusivism based on creed.

To understand how it is possible to reach ultimate felicity even for those who do not follow the right path, the path made obligatory for all mankind in the present age, it should be recalled that what invalidates the previously ordained religions is not that they contain no truth. God revealed the previous religions with the capacity to guide man toward perfection and salvation. That inherent capacity is not destroyed with the arrival of a new covenant, yet one who clings stubbornly to the old after the revelation of the new is

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[112] See, for example, (8:74) and (9:20).

[113] Murtaḍā Mutahhari, *'Adl Ilāhi* (Divine Justice), (Qom: Intishārāt Ṣadrā, 1357/1978), 352 ff.

surely wretched, for in this case the failure to accept the new covenant becomes rebellion against God.

According to non-reductive pluralism, correct faith is required but not necessary for salvation. Correct faith is required in the sense that it is made obligatory by the command of God. Correct faith is not necessary in the sense that it is possible for a person to be saved by the grace of God even though this obligation is not fulfilled. Different degrees of non-reductive pluralism will allow for more or less variance from correct belief. At the time of the Prophet of Islam, may the Peace and Blessings of Allah be with him and with his folk, Jews and Christians were considered to have incorrect beliefs, yet despite such incorrect beliefs God will not deny them their appropriate rewards. In two verses of the Qur'ān, reward is even promised to the Sabeans, who many commentators agree were star worshippers, provided they believe in Allah and the Last Day and do good:

> ﴿*Verily, those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there shall be no fear for them, nor shall they grieve.*﴾ (2: 62)[114]

As should be expected, there is some controversy about the correct interpretation of this verse among exegetes. Muslim exclusivists interpret it as meaning

[114] Also see (5:69).

that the non-Muslims (in the specific sense) who were followers of other ways during the periods in which those ways were ordained have nothing to fear, while present day followers of other religions cannot achieve salvation. They argue that if the verse were interpreted to include non-Muslims during the period following the advent of Islam, it would conflict with the noble verse: ﴿*And whoever seeks any religion other than Islam never shall it be accepted from him, and in the next world he shall be among the losers.*﴾ (3:84) However, there is no conflict with the inclusivist reading of the former verse, provided the latter verse is understood as referring to Islam in the general sense of total submission to Allah. On the other hand, (2:62) is not to be interpreted as meaning that more than one religion is divinely ordained during the present age. Rather, (2:62) may be understood as allowing that those who are incapable (*qāṣir*) but who live righteously may be saved. This reading of the verse is certainly more reasonable than the exclusivist's, for what is at issue is the manifestation of the universal call of Islam, and as far as the issue of salvation is concerned, it makes no difference whether the call has not become manifest to a person because of the time during which he has lived or because of the remoteness of the region in which he lives, or for some other reason.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, not to mention star-worship, is irreconcilable with Islamic monotheism, yet despite the recognition of irresolvable differences in belief, salvation is not to be denied on the basis of false belief alone. This, however, is not to say that all beliefs are equally conducive to salvation. According to Islamic doctrine, ultimate felicity is most effectively promoted through belief in the teachings of God Himself in the Qur'ān,

as elaborated by the last of His prophets ﷺ. Some forms of belief, on the other hand, like the worship of Lāt and Uzza by the pagan Arabs, are absolutely devoid of any truth and lead to wretchedness rather than to felicity. The People of the Book, Jews and Christians, despite irreconcilable differences in their beliefs with the teachings of Islam, may also be saved, provided that their incorrect belief is through no fault of their own. Since their religions were originally divinely inspired, they may even be drawn nigh to God by means of the divine truth contained in their religions. It is even possible that in like manner the followers of Hindu, Chinese, Buddhist, and other ways may reach paradise provided that their rejection of Islam is due to ignorance of Islam rather than prejudice against Islam, i.e., that they are to be considered *qāṣir* (incapable) rather than *muqāṣṣir* (negligent),for we cannot definitively rule that the followers of religions other than Judaism, Christianity and Islam are not "People of the Book", because it is impossible to determine that the original teachings contained in these religions were not brought by a prophet of Allah. The divergence between the content of their scriptures and teachings from those of Islam do not prove that the original teachings were not in essence the same. For although the scriptures and teachings of Christianity are inconsistent with those of Islam, this is explained by the erosion (*taḥrīf*) of the original teachings, and there is no reason why a similar strategy could not be used to explain the possibility that non-Abrahamic religions might be divinely revealed religions.[115] So, one who is

[115] There is also the issue of whether or not the non-...

incapable (*qāṣir*) may be able to achieve salvation by means of the divine truth which is contained in the religion he falsely believed to be presently required by God.

However, the question of the salvation of the incapable (*qāṣir*) is not decided merely on the basis of the truth or falsity of the teachings contained in his religion or system of beliefs, but also on the basis of one's reasons for belief. No matter how aberrant one's faith, if it is accompanied by absolutely sincere intention this sincerity by itself may win the favor of God, for sincerity itself is at the core of submission (*islām*). This point is best illustrated by Rūmī's famous story of Moses and the shepherd.[116] According to the story, God accepts the devotion of the shepherd despite the fact that he holds absurdly anthropomorphic beliefs about the deity, because of the simple purity of the shepherd's love of God.

A related point concerns the divine reward (*thawāb*) granted to the expert in Islamic law, the *mujtahid*, for his legal decisions. If the *mujtahid* comes to a wrong decision by honest mistake rather than by negligence, then although his decision is wrong, it still merits reward, and it must be carried out. In this case, to act properly, if this is believed to be improper, will itself be wrong. Now, in matters

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Abrahamic sects are to be considered *religions*. Some Buddhists, for example, claim that what they teach is merely a philosophy and method of meditation, and that one could be, for example, a Jew and a Buddhist at the same time, just as there are Christian Platonists and Christian Aristotelians.

[116] See Nicholson's edition of the *Mathnavi*, Book II, line 1720f.

pertaining to the fundamental principles of religion, imitation (*taqlīd*) is forbidden, and all must use the best of their abilities to determine what the correct faith is. So, in this area, every one is a *mujtahid*.

In short, the threat of damnation is conditioned not merely on disbelief or incorrect belief, but on sinful disbelief or incorrect belief. Wrong belief is not sinful for those who are incapable (*qāṣir*), but only for the negligent (*muqaṣṣir*). The negligent are like the hypocrites, for both proclaim outwardly what they deny inwardly. The hypocrites proclaim Islam with their tongues, but deny it in their hearts. At the same time, the hypocrite knows in the depths of his heart that Islam is true, but he does not act in accordance with it, so that his outward profession becomes a denial of Islam. Likewise, the negligent proclaim that they seek the truth with their tongues, but in their hearts they hide from the truth. At the same time, the negligent knows in the depths of his heart that there is a truth which he avoids, so that his outward profession of truth seeking coupled with his failure to actually pursue the truth becomes a denial of the truth. And so, it is appropriate that we find the promise of hell for the infidel so often joined with that of the hypocrite.

﴿وعد الله المنافقين و المنافقات و الكفار نار جهنم خالدين فيها هي حسبهم و لعنهم الله و لهم عذاب مقيم﴾

﴿*Allah has promised the hypocrite men and the hypocrite women and the infidels the fire of hell to abide therein; this suffices for them, and Allah has cursed them, and for them is a lasting chastisement.*﴾ (9:68)[117]

[117] Also see (9:73), (33:73), (48:6) and (66:9).

There is no way for us to say of any given individual that his disbelief is sinful or not (except for a few individuals whose fates have been revealed). The difference between the incapable (*qāṣir*) and the negligent (*muqaṣṣir*) lies within the heart. This, too, is a point stressed by Shahīd Mutahharī, who refers to the example of whether Louis Pasteur is damned despite his service to mankind:

> Not only with specific regard to Pasteur, but fundamentally, the reckoning of individuals in the hands of God. No one has a right to express a definite view about someone whether he is in heaven or hell.[118]

Even the Prophet did not have knowledge about what would happen to specific individuals in the hereafter except by divine revelation.[119]

Shahīd Mutahharī's expansion of the concept of the incapable (*qāṣir*) marks a major moral advance in Shī'ī theology, for it reaffirms the tie between moral responsibility and otherworldly rewards and punishments which had become endangered by overemphasis on doctrinal orthodoxy. Shahīd Mutahharī ridicules the idea that heaven should be reserved only for that tiny minority of the human population which accepts all the doctrines of the Shī'ī theologians, and while in hardly any particular instance can we claim to have knowledge about who is incapable and who is negligent, in the view of Shahīd

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[118] Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, *'Adl Ilāhī*, 293.
[119] Cf. (46:9) and (7:188).

Mutahhari it is not unlikely that great numbers of infidels are incapable.

2. 5. 3. The Threat

The question to be raised next is whether eternal damnation is the necessary consequence of sinfully incorrect belief, the incorrect belief of the negligent (*muqaṣṣir*). On the general issue of whether God must carry out His threats and promises it is customary to divide the theologians into three groups.

According to the Ash'arites, whatever God does is to be considered just by virtue of accordance with the divine will. If the ultimate purpose were decadence and pain, then they would be just and good. Hence, they held that there is no need for God to keep his promises. If He decided to reward the disbelievers and punish the believers, this would be no less just than the opposite policy.

According to the Mu'tazilites, on the other hand, God is necessarily just, and therefore He cannot break His promises of heavenly reward nor can He fail to carry out His threats of eternal damnation.

The Shī'i theologians, for the most part, have taken a third position. They hold that since His mercy has precedence over His justice, God cannot break His promises of rewards, but He may forgive those who are threatened with eternal damnation. No one can place any limit on the extent of the grace of God. Even though the hypocrites are consigned to the lowest level of hell, the possibility of divine mercy is

explicitly stated in the Qur'ān.[120] Nevertheless, unrepentant sinful infidelity is usually treated as an exception and is considered to result in eternal damnation without hope of reprieve.[121]

There has been some disagreement over whether the infidels will be rewarded for their good deeds. Some have held that there can be no reward for the negligent infidel at all. Others have held that reward may take the form of a decrease in the torments of hell.[122] On the other hand, from the time of Shaykh Mufid the theologians have generally held that no one with orthodox Shī'ī beliefs will suffer eternal damnation.[123] Thus, the concept of divine rewards and punishments degenerated to the point that it was imagined to turn entirely on one's doctrinal allegiances. However, this idea is not firmly grounded in the Qur'ān and *aḥādith*, but is claimed to be supported by rational argument, and the rational argument is far from convincing. It is held that the sinful orthodox must be rewarded for their orthodoxy (which is mistaken for faith) and that if the reward were to come prior to eternal punishment, the reward would be spoiled, and if it comes after punishment,

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[120] God's threat to the hypocrites may be found at (4:145) and the possibility of mercy for them is stated at (33:24).

[121] See Shaykh Ṣadūq, *Al-I'tiqādāt fi Din al-Imāmiyah* (Qom: Muḥaqiq, A. H. 1412), 45, translated by Asaf A. A. Fyzee, *A Shi'ite Creed* (Tehran: WOFIS, 1982), 63-64.

[122] See Ayatullah Abū al-Ḥasan Sha'rāni, *Sharḥ-e Tajrīd al-I'tiqād* (Tehran: Kitābfurūshi Islamiyah, 1991), 577f..

[123] See Martin J. McDermott, *The Theology of al-Shaikh al-Mufid* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1986), Ch. X.

the punishment cannot be eternal.[124] However, God could make the sinner forget that eternal punishment was coming during the period of reward, and He could alternate a year of punishment with a year of reward, so that both could be eternal, or He could limit the reward to a reduction in the intensity of the torments of hell. A better reason for holding that reward must follow punishment is to be found in the idea that reward in the afterlife is conditioned by a level of perfection and purification of the soul which is reached only after some burning. However, the reward for faith will guarantee eventual salvation despite major sins only if faith is understood as something much deeper than doctrinal affiliation, and in that case, the commission of major sin which is not absolved by repentance casts doubt upon the presence of real faith. The sinner must fear eternal damnation, and should not find any solace in the orthodoxy of his beliefs.

The story, no doubt apocryphal, is told that when Shaykh Bāyazīd enjoyed great popularity among the people, God said to him that if He were to reveal his secrets, the people would stone him. Bāyazīd replied that if he told the people the secret of the abundance of His mercy, none would obey Him. God agreed that the secrets should be kept! Rather than resting confident with the implications of such stories, it would seem more reasonable to hold that all responsible human beings, whatever their beliefs, should live in fear of the divine punishment they deserve, and in hope of God's grace.

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[124] See Allāmah Ḥilli, *Kashf al-Murād* (Qom: Mu'assesah al-Nashr al-Islāmi, n.d.), 414-415.

It has been argued that since it is stated in the Qur'ān that idolatry (*shirk*) will not be forgiven,[125] at least the unrepentant sinful idolater must suffer eternal damnation. However, the verse alluded to does not, by itself, prove the point, for without further evidence, whether rational or transmitted, it cannot be assumed that God's refusal to forgive the idolater must result in His failure to offer him any grace. The refusal to forgive idolatry would be preserved even if it only prevented the idolater from reaching some high station in heaven. If idolatry will truly prevent one from salvation, it must be understood in a way more profound than the acceptance of a pantheon of deities to be worshipped. What may be called ontological idolatry must be understood in a manner more clearly expressed by the Arabic *shirk*, which is usually translated as 'assigning partners to God'. Then the strategy for showing that *shirk* prevents one from attaining salvation would be to show that *shirk* is incompatible with the kind of purity of heart required for salvation.

In any case, the above discussion pertains only to negligent infidelity, not incapable infidelity. God does not reward sin of any sort, let alone sinful infidelity; but to insist that His grace is unlimited is to indicate the room for hope that even those considered most wicked may, by the grace of God, find the way to true repentance. No one can put limits on the grace of God, ﴿*...and that grace is in the hand of Allah, He*

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[125] (4:48).

bestows it on whom He will, and Allah is Lord of Mighty Grace.› (57:29)

2. 6. *Conclusion*

Now we may return to the options for explaining religious diversity considered by Wainwright: (a) denial of conflict, (b) epistemic inferiority, (c) unreliable means of belief production. With respect to the interior of the revealed religions, Muslims deny that there is any real conflict; but they recognize and insist upon the importance of conflicts among the doctrinal claims issued by the believers in different creeds. So, why do some people fail to accept the truth of Islam? The major reason given in the Qur'ān is sin. Pride, contempt, prejudice, stubborn attachment to the 'faith of our fathers' and unwillingness to comply with the practical demands of Islam are all mentioned. Others may fail to accept Islam because they lack awareness of its teachings. Yet others may fail to see the truth of the teachings of Islam because that truth has not been made manifest to them for any of various reasons. Perhaps they are so impressed with the truth contained in their own creed that they become attached to its particular embodiment and cannot recognize its more perfect expression in Islam. It is not that they are inferior to Muslims in their cognitive capacities, so that we should call them epistemic inferiors, nor that there is a methodological flaw in the way they generally form beliefs. Consider a group of physicists with different views. They are epistemic peers, and they share the same fundamental methodological principles. But one has insight and is able to formulate the correct theory, while the others continue to plod down dead ends. Perhaps some cases of religious disagreement are like this. One is blessed with insight, and another is blind to it. Sometimes religious difference may turn on the presence of grace.

Perhaps it is even possible that God should allow one to think that an incorrect creed is true because the incorrect creed may be better suited to that person's capacity for spiritual advancement. We cannot say. This requires knowledge into the unseen, into how God may extend His grace to His servants to guide them in His ways. But what has been said here should suffice to suggest how one might insist on the truth of Islam and yet be unsatisfied with the ways to explain religious diversity considered by Wainwright.

There remains one more important question related to the topic of religious pluralism which will only be touched upon here: its practical implications. One of the major motivations for liberal Christian religious pluralism was to provide the theological groundwork for better relations between Christians and non-Christians. Instead of viewing the non-Christian with contempt as damned, he is seen by the Christian pluralist as in essential agreement with Christianity, for all the major religions are held to differ only in their external aspects. Differences in religion are to be understood on the model of ethnic differences, and relations among the participants in different faith traditions are presumed to take shape within the framework of the liberal state, which proclaims complete religious neutrality while in fact it embodies the values of the dominant strand of main stream Protestant thinking.

In Islamic thought, to the contrary, religious differences are not seen as a matter of personal preference, but as expressions of communal loyalty grounded in spiritual insight and critical evaluation. Those who chose a religion other than Islam are making a mistake, either sinfully or excusably. Since there is no way for us to tell whether or not the mistake is excusable, where good relations with non-

Muslims are possible without condoning injustice, the presumption of an honest mistake is morally incumbent upon us. Good relations with non-Muslims are to take place either through agreement contracted by the parties involved, in the case of Muslims and non-Muslims of different countries, by observing the courtesy prescribed by Islamic etiquette (*ādāb*), or within the framework of Islamic governance, which has traditionally offered semi-autonomous status to the non-Muslim communities living within its jurisdiction who submit to its authority. Due to the force of European arms and the weaknesses of rival Muslim powers, whatever traces of the system of Islamic governance that remained in the nineteenth century were effectively wiped out and replaced by the system of nation-states. Muslims are only beginning to regain control of their lands, and the first steps toward Islamic governance are being taken, the most prominent such step being the Islamic Revolution of Iran. The system of tribute (*jizyah*) and protection for semi-autonomous communities of free non-Muslim citizens (*ahl al-dhimmah*) has not been revived yet, and while it may have been abused in some cases in the past, it holds the promise of greater freedom than that available within the framework of the liberal state.[126]

In Christianity, especially in Protestant Christianity, there is a strong link between salvation and true belief, because it is through faith that one participates in the Redemption, which alone is

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[126] See Ismā'il Fārūqī, *Al Tawḥid: Its Implications for Thought and Life* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1416/1995).

believed to afford salvation. This link between true belief and salvation survives among Christian proposals for religious pluralism, like those of Wilfred Cantwell Smith[127] and John Hick, in the idea that ultimately the variety of religious beliefs is a matter of surface differences over a fundamentally single faith, which may not even be expressible in human language. If one denies the doctrine of Redemption, and with it the link between faith and salvation which features so prominently in Christian thought, the obvious alternative, at least obvious in a Christian context, is the idea that faith is to be purchased through good works, an idea emphatically denounced by Luther and by the majority of Christian theologians, including Catholics, after him.

The Islamic tradition appears to offer another approach to the problem. Muslims, like Christians, reject the idea that good works alone are sufficient for salvation. Like Christian writings on the subject, it is not difficult to find Muslim expressions of the idea that there is nothing one can do through one's own efforts to make oneself worthy of salvation without the grace of God.

This is a theme which runs throughout Zayn al-'Abidin's *Ṣaḥīfat al-Sajjadiyah*.[128] Good works without faith appear ungrounded, for faith provides the cognitive framework in which the final good is to be understood and intentions to do good works are to be formed, and it is through such orientation and

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[127] See his *Religious Diversity*, ed. Willard G. Oxtoby (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) and *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

[128] Zayn al-Abidin, *Sahifat al-Sajjadiyah*, tr. William Chittick (London: Mohammadi Trust, 1989).

intentions that God draws His servants toward Him through His Mercy. But faith is more than the mere acceptance of a list of doctrines, it is a spiritual readiness to fare the way toward Allah and wholehearted submission to His will. In Islam, salvation is seen in terms of the movement of the soul toward God, a movement which in turn is explained in terms of the acquirement of the Divine attributes, and whose aim is a beatific encounter with Divinity, *liqā' Allah*. To achieve this, God demands faith and good works, and in the present age, this means the acceptance and practice of Islam as revealed to the last of His chosen messengers ﷺ; ultimately, however, it is neither by faith nor good works that man is saved, but by the grace of God.

An Islamic non-reductive pluralism may be contrasted with Hick's pluralism and Rahner's inclusivism in terms of the place of ignorance in the three views. In Hick's view every major creed, no matter how different, expresses an ultimately single faith. That ultimate faith may not be expressible in human language, so there is a sense in which believers are ignorant of what they really believe. On Rahner's view Christians know what they believe and it is only others who may be ignorant of their latent Christian belief. On the non-reductive view, there is no attempt to reinterpret apparently conflicting beliefs to reveal some hidden agreement. Instead of positing ignorance about what we believe, we are to admit our ignorance of how God may guide the sincere, and what beliefs are the result of a sincere quest for the truth.. The identities of all the prophets are not known, and in the most famous hadith about the number of the prophets, Abū Dhārr reports that the Prophet ﷺ told him there were one hundred twenty-four thousand prophets. Corrupted forms of the teachings of these prophets

may survive in any number of the variety of the world's religions. The admission of ignorance in this matter is an expression of humility before the judgment of Allah; such humility has featured prominently in the Islamic tradition, and it may provide a basis for an Islamic form of a non-reductive religious pluralism.

After mentioning some of the good people who will be saved and the hypocrites who will receive a double chastisement, the Qur'ān mentions that there are others who must await the command of God. Until then, we cannot say whether they will be rewarded or punished:

﴿*And others must await the command of Allah, whether He will chastise them or whether He will turn to them. And Allah is all Knowing, all Wise.*﴾ (9:106)[129]

John Hick's religious pluralism is to be lauded as a great improvement over its exclusivist and inclusivist predecessors in Christian theology, and Muslims will be impressed by the fact that the denial of the traditional Christian dogma of the Incarnation brings Hick's theology much closer to Islamic doctrine. Nevertheless, Hick's reductive pluralism hides a set of moral and political values which are at odds with Islam. They are at odds with Islam not only because of the detail of the judgments they inform, but, even more significantly, because of where they set their standards. Islam teaches that we are to look to

[129] See the discussion of this āyah and related *aḥādīth* in 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'i's *Al-Mizan.* Also see (5:118) and (33:24).

the Qur'ān and the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ to find guidance in politics and morals, while Hick would have us turn to the worldly currents of modern thought, which are more often than not decidedly opposed to Islam. And although a severe punishment awaits the enemies of Islam, as for those who honestly accept an invalid creed, it must be admitted that this invalid creed itself may be the vehicle through which God extends to them His grace and leads them to salvation. What is truly of value in Hick's religious pluralism is a tolerance which can be found more completely, in a sense, within the Islamic tradition, and may be formulated along the lines suggested above as a non-reductive pluralism.

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