One World: Many Voices

Intellectual Responses to Religious Pluralism

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Introduction

Pluralism is in vogue. As the Bangladeshi newspaper *Dainik Janakantha* editorialized in June 5th, 2001, "…it is the age of achieving freedom. It is the age of singing songs of triumph of pluralism over authoritarianism. It is the age of exception, the age of difference, and the age of proclaiming the victory of mankind and diversifying the sources of creativity."[1] Unfortunately, the current daunting reality does not endorse such a positive outlook. As I write, news has just come in of another suicide bombing in Iraq that killed two hundred people, leaving countless lives devastated, and further reducing any remaining element of trust in the country. How are Iraqis to reconcile their own internal religious differences while dealing both with military intervention by a foreign power and a civil conflict? It seems that hopes for a pluralistic religious society in Iraq are fading away. Across the world, the paradigm of hope has been replaced by many sentiments of pessimism. With today's challenges, is there a hope for the survival of religious pluralism?

In *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington states that the dominant characteristic of the post-Cold War global environment is violence between different ethnic and religious groups. In his thesis, Huntington argues that the primary axis of conflict in the future would be along cultural and religious lines. Many disagree with Huntington's thesis that the world's traditions are inherently and inevitably in conflict with each other. However, the daily news headlines make it clear that far too much violence in our world is related to religious differences. On September 11th, 2001, the world witnessed a vicious attack on human civilization. The attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. struck at symbols of American prosperity and power. In turn, many people in America have identified the enemy as another symbol - a monolithic Islam diametrically opposed to the democratic West. As a result, many people believe that Huntington's thesis has become a true prophecy manifested in the clash of religions between Christianity and Islam. In response to the September 11th terrorist attacks, Europe, America and many other countries enacted anti-terror laws (i.e. the USA PATRIOT Act) that have made many Muslim men and women in these countries feel that they are viewed with apprehension and even serious suspicion. These sad realities question the validity of the discourse of religious pluralism and indicate that there are very real, serious dangers to the development of religious pluralism. In fact, the whole notion of religious pluralism is in turmoil.

The political philosopher Michael Walzer wrote that the challenge of a multicultural society is to embrace its diversity while maintaining a common life. This suggests the need for all communities within a diverse society to take responsibility for embracing a shared life while maintaining their uniqueness.[2] For Walzer, it is this dynamic that leads to the ideal pluralist society as a "community of communities." Otherwise, a chasm of ignorance between different religious communities can too easily be filled by bigotry, often turning into violence and hatred. However, the question remains: How can we have a common life while maintaining our uniqueness in a changing world? Once again, the hopeful visions for the "triumph of

pluralism" and the "common life" seem very utopian at a time of great crisis in our world. Today, the world faces the 'War on Terror' and global militarization. Sadly, waves of local as well as global violence have overtaken the pillars of religious pluralism and threaten to escalate beyond all control. The tragic, unpredictable events in many regions cast their shadows over collective efforts to live in a pluralistic and peaceful world.

However, it is precisely during such times of adversity, ideological fundamentalism and absolutist exclusivity, that the world is most in need of voices and forces of sanity, reason, and moral responsibility - the genuine building blocks of religious pluralism. As we witness attempts at imposing a simplistic view of a Manichean universe, polarization, and reductively stereotyping good and evil, we are most in need of those who will engage in a redemptive validation of pluralism, tolerance, diversity, authenticity of identity, and a comprehensive engagement in collective responsibility. The increasing reality of interaction between cultures and religious traditions makes religious pluralism not only impossible to ignore, but an obligatory task for human empowerment and change. Religious pluralism seeks to give a voice and an audience to the silenced as well as grant a sense of legitimacy to the excluded.

Religious groups tend not to ask themselves why the "other" thinks of them the way that they do. At the 2003 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in Atlanta, sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow was asked how he thought faith communities were adapting to religious pluralism in close quarters. He used the metaphor of an elevator: Jews, Christians, Muslims, and the rest of world's religions are all riding it together. They are increasingly aware of the other people around them, but they are doing just about everything they can to avoid a real interaction. To deal with the reality inside this "world-elevator," Diana Eck founded the "Pluralism Project" at Harvard University in 1991 in order to study and document the growing religious diversity of the United States, with a special view to its new immigrant religious communities. Eck suggests that religious pluralism is only achieved by the intentional and positive engagement of differences.[3] Mere diversity, Eck maintains, is simply the fact that people from different backgrounds live in proximity to each other. For Eck, pluralism, on the other hand, is when people from different backgrounds seek mutual understanding and positive cooperation with each other.

What can scholarship in religious studies offer to the realm of religious pluralism? Scholars of religious study attempt to gain as comprehensive a view of human thought and action as possible. These scholars are not satisfied with examining only what the social sciences defines as "religion." Instead, many scholars find religiousness and spirituality expressed in almost all human endeavors. They move behind, before, beyond, as well as into areas called "religion" in order to encounter those ideas, images, and actions that express the ultimate meaning of existence for people in a certain time and place. Religious studies scholars are concerned with religious ideas, images, and actions regardless of the context in which they may occur. They examine religious beliefs, commitments, and devotion as part

of the comprehensive enterprise of trying to understand how humans express notions of ultimate order and meaning. For them, the issues of power, loyalty, and identity are religious because they pertain to ultimate order and meaning. These are the issues that begin to fashion the religion of the pluralistic culture. They create pluralism because they affirm a set of values beyond traditional allegiances. Diversity becomes pluralism, creating symbols, ideas, rituals, and myths that maintain the worth of plurality. Pluralism becomes a religious phenomenon, and a study of the culture of religious pluralism becomes more than an enterprise in the social sciences.

The scope of this essay is twofold. First, this essay is a study of religious pluralism. By pluralism, I refer not to the fact there is a plurality of religions in the world, but to the intellectual responses to this plurality in the field of religious studies. For some scholars it is a response asserting some measure of equal standing between the major religious traditions. They maintain that God or the Absolute is speaking uniquely to each religious tradition, and it is through the ecumenical efforts of each tradition that the others will come to hear the unique word that God or the Absolute has spoken to it.[4] The question of truth becomes a question of the reliability of our ideas and assumptions. Correspondingly, they deny types of uniqueness and absoluteness claimed for one religion or another. For others, religious pluralism refers to an ideological or normative belief that there should be mutual respect between different religious systems and freedom for all. They hold that peaceful coexistence between different religious systems is preferable to enmity between them. Second, this essay will examine some of the factors evident in the current situation of religious pluralism from the perspective of the scholarship of religious studies. That is at least the task I have set myself.

An Overall View: the Meanings of Religious Pluralism

Before beginning to discuss the intellectual responses to religious pluralism, some definitions and common challenges in today's world of religious pluralism should be briefly identified. Discussing pluralism is a complex matter. The term pluralism is used to cover many aspects of the society in question - ethnicities, political ideologies, economic theories, genders, religions, and even, as found in some religious educational literature, a variety of methodological techniques, teachers, students, and philosophies of education. The term religious pluralism, which is now in widespread use, reflects various realities and has different meanings. Classical approaches in religious and sociological studies to understanding religious pluralism offer two possible models: the assimilation model of a cultural melting pot and the functionalist model of social disorder. Neither appears adequate in the task of understanding contemporary religious pluralism. For example, new religious immigrants are not steadily assimilating into the Western way of life, but are actively engaged in a process of transforming it. Most importantly, most of us wish to avoid social chaos as a result of religious pluralism. We would rather prefer the emergence of society that celebrate religious pluralism and social and religious systems that increasingly accommodate plurality.

For some scholars, pluralism points to a state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious or social groups maintain an autonomous participation in the development of their groups within the confines of a common civilization. In certain contexts, religious pluralism can also refer to the plurality and pluriformity of societies, which have been a reality since long ago. Historians point out that pluralism as an ideology was stressed most vigorously in England during the early 20th century by a group of writers, including Harold Laski and R.H. Tawney, who were reacting against what they alleged to be the alienation of individuals under conditions of unrestrained capitalism.[5] They argued it was necessary to integrate the individuals in a social and religious context which could give them a sense of community. A historical example of such a society was the medieval structure of guilds, chartered cities, villages, monasteries, and universities in Europe of the 16th century.

For the British sociologist James Beckford, the religious pluralism characteristic of "Western democratic" societies to date has been a pluralism based on the right to religious freedom.[6] This right, at the collective level, means that religious diversity is not simply de facto but also *de jure*. In this sense the various policies of tolerance in Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, which to a varying extent enabled minority faiths not to disappear, were not yet a product of religious pluralism, Beckford argues. In other words, religious pluralism is inseparable from the political modernity which was established in Europe and the United States near the turn of the eighteenth century.[7]

For Beckford and other scholars, religious pluralism is understood as a political principle. Strong pluralism needs to be based on the right of individuals to religious freedom. Some scholars distinguished between

several forms of religious pluralism. In the diachronic perspective, a distinction is drawn between an emancipatory pluralism pertaining strictly to the individual's right to religious liberty (and entailing, in particular, a de-ethnicization of religion), and a pluralism of identities marked by the demand from different religions for full and equal recognition of their individuality. The real diversity of national models of emancipatory pluralism is also explained by the antithesis between individualistic pluralism and communitarian pluralism. "Individualistic pluralism" is founded on the freedom (independence) of individuals, whereas "communitarian pluralism" is a reaction to the assertion of modernity (rise of secularization and establishment of societies based on the individual).[8] Since this reaction is forced to take cognizance of the new situation with regard to religious pluralism, it (re)creates, within society as a whole, a faith-based community that is closed and hostile to modernity.

Ole Riis, a Danish sociologist, has observed that the concept of religious pluralism may be used "in a descriptive and evaluative sense."[9] But, for Beckford, religious pluralism signifies a social and political system which grants every religion equal respect and facilities for individuals to practice their own religions without hindrance. This involves allowing for the individuality of each religion and not turning the specific features of the dominant religion into the standard practice. In fact, such pluralism would be "strong pluralism," according to Beckford's term. In Beckford's opinion, fact and value should be kept separate from each other for the sake of clarity. He therefore believes that the term "religious diversity" should be used to describe empirical reality. On the other hand, religious pluralism is a very specific way of considering this diversity, being "an ideological or evaluative response to empirical diversity" based on mutual respect between different religious systems with the aim of peaceful coexistence for the various religions.

Much of the philosophical discussion on religious pluralism continues to center on the works of John Hick. Hick has focused his attention on the differences between the various world religions. His basic pluralistic contention is not that different religions make no conflicting truth claims.[10] In fact, he believes that the differences of beliefs between (and within) the traditions are legions and has often discussed these conflicts in great detail. His basic pluralistic claim, rather, is that such differences are best seen as, different ways of conceiving and experiencing the one ultimate divine reality." However, if the various religions are really "responses to a single ultimate transcendent reality," how then does one account for the significant differences among these basic theistic systems? Hick's explanation is that this limitless divine reality has been thought and expressed by different human mentalities forming and formed by different intellectual frameworks and devotional techniques.[11]

Some scholars note that religious pluralism is more likely to generate conflict in societies where the dominant religion retains sovereignty as the operative religion of the social system. Religious pluralism is less likely to generate conflict in societies in which the value of religious freedom is upheld by the operative religion of the social system, whether or not the

dominant religion retains sovereignty as the operative religion.[12] For years, sociologists of religion used to point out that pluralism undermined participation in religion and agreed that the relationship was negative. The best-known version of this theory was advanced by Peter Berger.[13] He argued that religious pluralism reduces religious vitality through its effect on plausibility.[14] The more worldviews there are, the less plausible each seems, and as a result, the less religious belief and activity there will be. Over the last decade, this theory has been challenged by advocates of religious economics or a "supply-side" model of religious activity. Led by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, the challengers have argued that the traditional view is backwards; religious pluralism can be positively associated with religious participation. For them, the key mechanism is not plausibility, it is competition. Starting from the assumption that "religious economics are like commercial economies," they argue that competition among religious groups increases the quantity and quality of religious products available to consumers and, consequently, the total amount of religion that this consumed.[15]

Religious pluralism can assume many different forms. To be more precise, pluralism can refer to an ideological or normative belief that there should be mutual respect between different cultural systems and freedom for them all. It holds that peaceful coexistence between different cultural systems is preferable to enmity between them. It sometimes suggests that a state of balance in the importance attached to different religious systems is better than an ideological monopoly or a very one-sided relationship between a dominant system and subordinate systems. Pluralism is not diversity alone, but an energetic engagement with diversity. Pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference. It means holding those deepest differences, even our religious ones, not in isolation, but in dialogue and a relationship with one another.

Religious Pluralism: Common Challenges

At this time it is appropriate to briefly highlight some common challenges and difficulties in present-day worlds of religious pluralism.

Secularization

Secularization has diverse meanings. Secularization theory offers an easy answer to the problem of pluralism: religious pluralism does not matter because in a secularized social system, religion does not matter. One of the secularization theory's ironies is that it does not necessarily mean that religion becomes unproblematic. On the contrary, religious pluralism becomes more controversial and challenging precisely at the time when secularization is in the process of losing some of its significance as a force shaping social and cultural life.

Religion and State

In England today, it seems that the practical problems raised by religious pluralism all call into question the status, the nature, and the significance of the Church of England.[16] Some scholars outline the current debate on possible solutions for reforming religious representation in the House of Lords in order to take into account the increasing religious diversity in England. They explain the various options, together with the underlying issues, advantages, and drawbacks of each. Some scholars propose solutions that have long characterized this type of debate in England: disestablishment, political institutionalization of religious plurality, or the legal status quo with a rewriting of the role played by the Church of England.

Forced Conversion

An obvious issue of difficulty is the missionary activity of some religions which occurs when the superimposition of one's own criterion upon the other is followed by efforts to convert the other. Difficulty ensues when this desire and direction to carry one's preaching and teaching to others is made in a militant or exclusive manner. Religious pluralism seeks to promote the freedom of religion and conscience as a fundamental human right. In this situation, religious pluralism, which is based on the right to religious freedom can be in turmoil.

Exclusive Claims

The phrase "religious exclusivist" is sometimes used by philosophers such as Peter van Inwagen as a label for anyone who claims that his or her perspective on a religious issue is true and that any incompatible perspective is false. Exclusivists say that their religion is the only true religion and that those who adhere to it are saved. A dangerous threat to the creative contribution of pluralism is that at times, some members of religions with exclusive claims react to the challenge of pluralism with militant exclusivism. This may generate a violent ideological fundamentalism. The fallacy of fundamentalism, or even divine intervention and dispensation, can be exploited to justify absolutism and exclusivity, thereby ending all hope of a solution based on dialogue, while claiming unrestricted license to kill and destroy.

Scholarly Perspectives on Religious Pluralism

Wilfred Cantwell Smith[17]

Wilfred Cantwell Smith says that theology needs to be true to a modern perception of the world. His rejection of supernaturalism can also be discerned in the writings of some contemporary religious pluralists. Smith rejects the idea that God has constructed Christianity in favor of the idea that God has inspired us to construct it, as He/She/It has inspired Muslims to construct what the world knows as Islam, or…Ramanuja to write his theological commentaries. He also rejects the idea that, "God has given Christianity privileged statutes," and he adds that the assumption by Christians that they have been accorded quite special treatment by God, available to no one else in like measure is "theologically wary."[18] He instead affirms "pluralism," according to which the figure of Christ is only one from among others (through) which God has entered history, so that we can hold that God has played in human history a role in and through the Qur'an, in the Muslim case, comparable to the role in the Christian case in and through Christ. Smith's rejection of the idea of God as an omnipotent being who, whether always or only sometimes, simply determines the events of our world, is suggested by his statement that part of the truth about God is that "God is confronted with recalcitrance…of us human beings."[19]

Smith strongly urges the necessity of learning each other's religious language and thought forms. Only then will the vocabulary problem be solvable. As a contribution to the process that one must go on while learning their language, Smith offers the following suggestion as a possible basis for discussion between theists and non-theists: "by the term God one means a truth-reality that explicitly transcends conception, but in so far as conceivable is that to which man's religious history has at its best been a response, human and in some sense inadequate."[20] Smith strongly urges that our understanding of each other's concepts be anchored in history, even for history-transcending and self-transcending concepts such as God. The problem is that some religions claim that truth is not anchored or revealed in that historical process, but in the reality that is behind or beyond it.

In his book, *Toward a World Theology*, Smith gives careful attention to the importance of language in religious dialogue. Although he agrees that knowledge of each other's language is essential, he takes a further step in suggesting the need for some common operational or generic terms in which communication across religions can take place. He proposes the construction of conceptual categories to facilitate dialogue and attempts to begin this by redefining the terms faith, salvation, theology, and God. Some scholars see a very real danger in this approach as the construction of such categories will lead to the formation of a meta-language, which would be yet one more thought form to add to those already existing. The best safeguard against such a danger, they claim, would be to let the various religions speak as much as possible in their own language and thought forms.

Mircea Eliade[21]

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Mircea Eliade's great works *The History of Religious Ideas* and *Patterns in Comparative Religion* show he dared to interpret all phenomena (i.e. ideas, rituals, myths, symbols, and sacred texts) and illuminate the meaning of each by its relationships and interconnections to each other. Above all, as in the interpretation of art, Eliade insisted that the interpreter of religion needs to locate and interpret not the period-pieces of religion but the classics; those original religious expressions of the sacred which remain highly particular in both origin and expression. These classics, for Eliade, also disclose the universal reality of the religious as the manifestation of the cosmos and, ultimately, of Being itself.[22] By focusing major attention on the interpretation of all religious classics in all religions, moreover, Eliade's interpretation theory may hold a singular clue to understanding the elusive phenomenon of religion.[23] By taking this approach, Eliade welcomed the other, the different, and the many as equal participants in the religion of the cosmos that unites all humanity and as equal participants who could teach modern mankind the fuller meaning of a new humanism that would finally take seriously the whole of humanity.[24] Eliade's approach teaches us that the interpreter of religion must be willing to interpret the claim to the attention of the other in order to understand even the self. In seeking dialogue with the archaic other, one needs to pay attention to the archaic traditions alive in the world as well as to remember one's own repressed archaic heritage. The archaic is as the "Other," but must not be allowed to be merely a projected Other. Its memory lives even now: memory heals, memory liberates, and memory manifests the power and rhythms of the sacred cosmos itself.[25] That cosmos the archaic traditions can teach us to see anew with the always youthful eyes of their healing memory.

Ninian Smart[26]

Ninian Smart argues that the philosophy of religions should be extended to the philosophy of worldviews in order to develop a new understanding of religious pluralism. For Smart, the Western philosopher of religious studies deals at the intellectual level with a relatively simplified system of ideas in comparison with the complexities of the modern systematic interpretation of Christianity and Judaism. He argues that the philosophy of religions should be broader.[27] Thus, the new term "the philosophy of worldviews" seems more appropriate. The philosophy of worldviews is tied to worldviews as they actually exist in the world as well as their developmental historical contexts. Such a philosophy, Smart claims, is closer to the analysis of reality which is absent in the modern philosophy of religions. The task, then, is to clarify the criteria for determining the truth between the different worldviews and outline an inventory of considerations relative to the truth of worldviews. These considerations are related to consistency, tension, epistemological tension, rivalry, ethical insights, and psychology. This makes systematic theology more difficult, but richer. For Smart, the major consequence of applying this philosophy is the sense of inclusiveness that becomes requisite for reflections on the nature and the destiny of human beings. Smart argues that a major consequence of his intellectual enterprise is that, "the philosophy of worldviews reminds one how much the practical and the theoretical are interwoven in humankind's system of belief in a way

which leads to a gap between epistemology and commitment, that is, between the softness of evidence and the deep meaning of a movement or tradition."[28]   A serious challenge to Smart's views is how to define the term "worldview" and "religion."   These terms remain so very ambiguous and possibly could have so many conflicting interpretations.

Stephen Kaplan[29]

Stephen Kaplan argues that religious pluralism is a modern position born not out of openness of one religious tradition to another, but rather out of a philosophical attempt to confront the confluence of cultural boundaries and the growth of relativism.   For Kaplan, the major world religions are not traditionally pluralistic; they are either exclusivistic or inclusivistic.   For Kaplan, exclusivism tells us that there is no salvation outside of one particular religious tradition, whereas inclusivism extends the possibility of salvation to those outside its fold.   However, the means of salvation and the form of salvation are restricted to that which is found within the inclusivist's tradition.[30]   Kaplan proposes in *Different Paths, Different Summits: A Model for Religious Pluralism* a new form of religious pluralism, namely an ontological and stereological pluralism.

In Kaplan's book, the aim is to, "attempt to envision how more than one religious tradition can be ultimately true, not penultimately true; ….to conceptualize the logical framework in which ultimate reality may be conceived as plural, not singular."[31]   Moreover, Kaplan provides a metaphysical system whereby people may view religion as simultaneously existing, equally valid, and (perhaps) mutually exclusive, yet not contradictory.   In this metaphysic, there may exist multiple ontologies. Each is to be viewed on its own terms and judged within its own stereological providence.   Kaplan constitutes a valid religion by the efficacy of its stereological solution to the human condition.   To this end, he utilizes the model, provided initially by David Bohm, of holography.[32]   Bohm's goal is to use the holographic model to explain the possibility of viewing both quantum mechanics and relativity theory as simultaneously existing and mutually exclusive, but not contradictory.   Using this holographic model as a guide, Kaplan indicates that 1) both domains logically demand the other; 2) both are simultaneously existing and neither is logically prior; and 3) both are interpenetrating.[33]

Kaplan chooses to use Bohm's holographic model in order to understand particular stereological solutions as professed by three specific religious traditions.   The stereological solutions with their representative religions are: theistic salvation according to Richard of St. Victor, monistic non-dualistic liberation as represented by the Advaita Vedantin, and the process non-dualistic liberation of the Yogacara Buddha. With these traditions, Kaplan achieves a variety of religious perspectives and places them, complete with their ontological perspectives, within his metaphysical system.   In this form of religious pluralism, different individuals with different beliefs and religious practices reach different conclusions to the human existence - or different stereological conclusions.   This model proposes that within one, and only one, metaphysical universe can there be different ontological natures.   Each of these equal and simultaneous

ontological natures provides different individuals with the opportunity to achieve different stereological ends; different forms of liberation or salvation. In this form of religious pluralism there are many different paths as well as many different summits. With regard to the issue of ultimate truth, Kaplan argues that being right does not necessitate that someone else is wrong. On this basis, one does not demand that the other abandon or denigrate their claims to truth in order to ensure one's own claims to truth.

Harold Coward[34]

Harold Coward argues that the history of religions shows that each religion rose in a religiously plural environment and shaped itself in reaction to that pluralism. For Coward, religions and philosophies responded to pluralism in different ways. Some religious philosophies attempted to reduce all religions to one universal faith implying that all religions are really the same. This view has been considered unacceptable by many major religions like Christianity and Islam. For Coward, this view leads to a violation of the principles of religious freedom. Some philosophies suggested that the various religions have never been distinct entities. Coward responds that in their instrumental forms, religions have constantly borrowed from and interacted with each other.[35] Another common feature that Coward observes in the history of religions is that the superimposition of one's own criteria of validity upon another religion can lead to tension and isolation.

Coward attempts to indicate six presuppositions upon which the religious dialogue of the future should be grounded.[36] These presuppositions are: (1) that in all religions there is experience of a reality that transcends human conception; (2) that reality is conceived in a plurality of ways both within each religion and among all religions, and that the recognition of plurality is necessary both to safeguard religious freedom as well as to respect human limitations; (3) that the pluralistic forms of religion are instrumental in function; (4) that due to our finite limitations and our simultaneous need for commitment to a particular experience of transcendent reality, our particular experience, though limited, will function in an absolute sense as the validating criterion for our own personal religious experience; (5) that the Buddha's teaching of critical tolerance and moral compassion always must be observed; and (6) that through self-critical dialogue we must penetrate even further into our own particular experience of transcendent reality (and possibly into the transcendental reality of others).

For Coward, a basic prerequisite for future dialogue is that all participants have accurate information about each other's religions. Fulfilling this prerequisite is probably the single largest obstacle to the success of religious dialogue. Coward notes that the majority of people today are illiterate of their own religion as well as the religion of others. Therefore, the academic discipline of religious studies has a major role to play in overcoming this problem.[37] Intellectual knowledge of the belief systems of all religions is needed, but will not be sufficient by itself. For Coward, one will not be able to emphasize the sense of transcendent reality that the forms of each religion seek to convey if only surface or basic intellectual knowledge is achieved. Thus, true empathy and understanding

require that we learn each other's language, for therein are the important nuances of transcendent experience that are often lost in translation. Coward points out that the educational prerequisite for future dialogue is a stiff and a serious one, requiring dedication and effort from all who would partake of this dialogue. Pluralism should be based on dialogue. In this conext, he proposes that the language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, and criticism and self-reflection. Dialogue means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences.

John Rawls[38]

"The Fact of Pluralism", as John Rawls calls it, has not merely developed by means of migration, but rather through communication and the global disintegration of communication barriers.[39] For Rawls, pluralism has led to a differentiation of social positions, which have created incommensurable philosophical, religious, and moral positions through the process of modernization. These can no longer be reduced to former value system, due to the democratic structure of the occidental world. Rawls' idea is to prove that the "Fact of Pluralism" does not create indifference or even skepticism, but rather the opposite in the search of modern societies for (even if only minimal) forms of consensus building, which enables the survival of plurality according to Rawls. He adds his central question, which at the same time is a central question for religions, inter-cultural education: "How is it possible, that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable religions, philosophical, and moral doctrines?" For Rawls, if one acknowledges that there is always certain coherence between the "other" and "oneself," one also has to acknowledge that the "other" remains constantly different. There is no way to homogeneity by trying to make the different alike. For Rawls, the recognition of a pluralist society underwent several stages:

The first stage is the confessional pluralism dating back to the medieval days. These developments are most visible in the effects of the Reformation through its social and religious impacts with the falling apart of a unifying religious concept.

A second stage is the social phenomenon of "class pluralism" dating back to the early days of industrialization in Europe.

A third stage is the appearance of secularization and accompanying ideologies leading to socio-religious as well as political plurality.

A next stage seems to be the cultural pluralism dating back to migration movements (labor and political conflicts) since the middle of the 20th century. This process has gained momentum in recent years due to increased political upheavals and ecological devastation as well as related natural catastrophes. This development includes the growth of religious pluralism in many Western communities.

The present economic situation (globalization) supports development, which can be termed ethnic and religious plurality. The function and role of the nation-state is of lesser and lesser importance and a new momentum stems from the struggle of minorities for traditional religious-cultural, including territorial settings. Thus, within a culturally unifying attempt of

economic globalization, the plurality of the local gains a new momentum in what is often termed the "village world."

Economic globalization is an abstraction that is often discussed in exclusively economic terms. It is progress measured according to improvements in the infrastructure, in industrialization, and in a nation's GNP –all in the belief that growth in these fields will ultimately raise the quality of people's lives. And it will, but quality of life depends also on other factors that are frequently left out of the equation. One such consideration is humanitarianism, and human rights, which recognizes the common humanity shared by each and every individual. Another related concern that places the individual squarely in the context of his or her community is culture and religion. Closely related to both is the question of identity. Sociologists tell us that every individual plays a multiplicity of roles related to the family, the workplace, and a host of communities ranging from the religious to the political. In other words, we all possess diverse and divergent identities that make each of us unique.

Sayyed Hossein Nasr[40]

In his article "To Live in a World with No Center - and Many," Sayyed Hossein Nasr gives several of his reasons for a pluralistic worldview.[41] According to Nasr, the very existence of human life requires living with a meaning-giving center to which all aspects of human life are related. For Nasr, the existence of such a center is necessary for avoiding a life of chaos. Only through orienting our lives towards a meaning-giving center can we eliminate the dangers of nihilism, atheism, and other ideologies that threaten the sacred aspect of human life.

Nasr argues that Western civilization created a center that underlied all aspects of human life during medieval times. Although this center, or homogenous worldview, has been challenged in many aspects since medieval times, Nasr argues that ethical life survived until recent decades without being challenged seriously. However, during the past few decades, even the, "very foundations of the ethical norms" have been challenged. Other developments, such as new nihilistic philosophies, various attempts at the revision of history, and the deconstruction of sacred scripture and well-known works of literature, have helped create a chaotic and centerless world where our absolute values have lost their ultimate point of reference, Nasr argues.

Nasr explains that pluralism has been widely considered the only alternative to this centerless worldview. According to Nasr, one of the most important reasons why pluralism has been so important, especially during recent times, is that given the present world situation, we can no longer isolate ourselves from exposure to other religious, cultural, and ethnic diversities. This exposure helps us understand and appreciate the true nature and value of the other. For Nasr, several developments, especially in the United States, have prepared the ground for a more pluralistic appreciation of the other. In today's United States, one can easily see that there are multiple religions, along with diverse cultural and ethnic identities. Thanks both to migration and conversion in the North American continent, there are numerous types of religious people. Accordingly, Nasr argues that the

diverse religious and philosophical currents and ethic groups have helped strengthen a more pluralistic consciousness. Given the pluralistic context of the present world, he says that, "on the religious level, it becomes even more difficult to assert the truth of only our religion while denying any truth to the religions of others."[42]

Although he affirms the value of pluralism, Nasr is very concerned about the loss of the notions that give meaning and value to our lives. He writes:

"But what about the question of truth? And what about the principles of human action, the ethical norms by which we must live as individuals and also members of a human collectivity? Can we simply affirm pluralism with total disregard for the truth and falsehood of things or have a view of the world without a frame of reference?"[43]

In Nasr's view, any pluralistic position that will encourage the loss of our values is deeply problematic. Such loss would bring about destructive consequences. For Nasr, the reality of pluralism cannot be ignored, so we can no longer live in a nostalgic world whether or not there be only one center. Considering the dangers of a centerless world, relativism and nihilism are likewise not real options. But, "there is also another possibility, which is to be able to live in a world with many centers while confirming the reality of the center of our own traditional universe."[44] The real solution to the issue of pluralism, Nasr further holds, lies in accepting, "the transcendental unity of religions at the level of the Absolute," endorsing the fact that, "all paths lead to the same summit."[45] He believes that his version of pluralism, according to which there is only one Absolute and all manifestations of the Absolute are relatively absolute,[46] can do justice to all the traditions.

For Nasr, every religion and culture is based on a center from which moral, social, intellectual, and artistic values stem. The real task before us, therefore, is to live in a way that appreciates the value and importance of these various religions and cultures without falling into the dangers of sheer relativism and nihilism. How is that possible? What is the constructive part of Nasr's argument that will make it possible to live in the midst of such multiplicity and diversity without falling into sheer relativism? Contrary to those who see diversity as an inevitable cause for "the clash of civilizations;" Nasr argues that diversity does not necessarily imply such a clash. The reason for this argument lies in the considerable similarities among various traditions. In Nasr view, "there is a remarkable unanimity in the various traditional religions and philosophies, which provide the guiding principles concerning the meaning of human life, the significance of the good as the principle of human actions, and the presence of a transcendent dimension to human existence."[47] Nasr argues that although there are many theological differences among these religious traditions, those differences are "overshadowed by the reality and presence of the Ultimate." Therefore, those differences possess a secondary importance for Nasr.

Martin Marty[48]

Martin Marty argues that, "… it is impossible to make sense of the Native-, African-, European-, Asian-, or Hispanic American peoples and their traditions without engaging in profound exploration of their religious

dimensions."[49] As a religious historian, he has confidence that free societies are going to continue to possess religious pluralism as well as agencies that care about the religious education of that society. The challenge for Marty is how to learn to live creatively with them. Marty also suggests that pluralism can mean three things:[50] 1) "It can grow simply out of the empirical reality, the given situation, the morning news." By this he means that when we look at the Western culture there are many groups of various kinds, and he illustrates with religious groups (at least 440) to which must be added the number of sects, cults, causes, and cells; and that we look out on a nation in which there are a great number of religious realities. 2) Pluralism can mean "political resolution, the polity which allows a people to have a civic peace." For example, in United States, "it is agreed that any and all religious groups, as long as they keep certain general norms and standards of the society - a society that has the broadest norms ever known - are fully welcome. Most importantly, there is not to be a privileged group and there are not to be liabilities against those who keep the civic peace." 3) Pluralism can mean "philosophical pluralism." Here, Marty is taking about whether people view reality as cohesive with a single center, or if it is in some way plural. Marty says that as long as pluralism exists, one can live creatively with it and therefore make the best of it.

Streams in the Valley

The presence, power, and richness of religious traditions has vigorously entered human awareness in today's world. Our contemporary intercommunication and interdependent planet has made us aware, more clearly but also more painfully than ever before, of the multiplicity of world religions and the many different ultimate answers given by these religions. Because of this fact we, as human beings, are facing questions and challenges we never have before confronted. The challenges of this awareness of religious diversity have led thinkers to explore the meanings of religious pluralism. Interestingly, many religious traditions are also internally plural, fluid, and evolving. They can be responsive to new interpretations by gifted religious leaders and capable of forming individuals, social movements, and communities that practice and promote religious pluralism.

Given that the world is moving in the direction of religious pluralism, one of the first steps needed to ensure a smooth transition is a "cultural audit" to identify the core values and indigenous elements in each society. Eliade's genuine works teach that the interpreter of religion must be willing to interpret the claim to the attention of the other in order to understand even the self. Pluralism tells us that homogenization is not the answer. Pluralism recognizes a plurality of means to achieve the same ends. It is not people's choices that need to change, but rather the ability of institutions within societies (e.g., government, law, the educational system) to reflect and process those choices. The chairwoman of the Commission on Gender Equality in South Africa, Thenjiwe Mtintso, in discussing how South Africa should deal with religious practices that might conflict with women's rights, agrees: "Of course you can't simply legislate against these things. The challenge is how to change some of these cultures and some practices which are supposedly our culture."[51]

Wilfred Cantwell Smith urges the necessity of learning each other's language and thought forms. In other words, pluralism means accepting not just that religions are many but they are different: they are so different that they can not be boiled down to a system, common sense, or common ground. Clearly, the next step is not the unification of different religions into one to form some kind of new global religion. On the contrary, a plurality of diverse religions is positive and valuable. The variety around the world of different ways of being human is something to celebrate and understand, not something to try to iron out. In the words of Diana Eck, "…the encounter of a pluralistic society is not premised on achieving agreement, but achieving relationship." Pluralism will always demand that we share our particular understanding of religion with one another. If done in sympathy and respect for the integrity of the other, such sharing, as past and present examples demonstrate, can result in spiritual growth and enrichment for all.

Harold Coward believes that there is a basic prerequisite for religious dialogue: all participants should have accurate information about each other's religions. Fulfilling this task is probably the single largest obstacle to the success of this dialogue. He therefore perceives that the academic

discipline of religious studies has a major role to play in fulfilling this prerequisite. He also acknowledges that the intellectual knowledge of the facts of all religions is needed, but alone that will not be sufficient. So we might urgently need a more sophisticated concept of dialogue than the one prevailing today. Our shared human values remind us that it is vital to recognise the humanity of the other in order to affirm our own humanity. In that sense, dialogue must be linked practically and meaningfully with political dialogue. It must be a parallel process rather than a pleasant afterthought. This is how we can restore the peaceful role of our pluralism when it is needed most. Jonathan Sacks developed a notion of languets to address the challenges of nurturing commitments in parochial communities, characterized by race, religion, and ethnicity as well as the broader society. To achieve this, Sacks claims that we have to learn two languages. He writes, "…there is a public language of citizenship that we have to learn if we are to learn to live together. And there is a variety of second languages which connect us to our local framework of relationships." We need to talk to each other not only talk at each other.

"I have always believed," the Dalai Lama once commented, "that people can change their hearts and minds through education, and turn away from violence." In the past, the "three Rs" (Reading, Writing and [A]rithmetic) were considered the essential basic skills needed by children at the early stages of their learning experiences. Learning to live together in a pluralistic world would necessitate emphasis upon a fourth skill, or, rather, a group of skills - namely, life skills. Such a group of skills is the backbone of pluralist education, which encompasses the education of the learner as an individual and as a member of society with a pluralistic and global outlook. The concept of "learning to live together" has been eloquently referred to by Jacques Delors and others in their well-known work, *Learning: The Treasure Within*, as one of the four pillars of education along with the concepts of "learning to know," "learning to do," and "learning to be." As basic prerequisite for future dialogue to promote pluralism, these four pillars can be rephrased as follows: learning to live together - democratically; learning to know - for the future; learning to do - usefully; learning to be - peacefully. Effective religious studies education can be secured through its integration into all social and human sciences, as well as through curricular and extracurricular activities. It should be designed to lead, rather than follow, the practices and values of the pluralistic society by promoting high-level intellectual skills in the learner such as critical thinking, and problem-solving. But there is a challenge: How do we reconcile this with those who believe that religious education goes against the separation of state and church, mosque or synagogue?

We live in a world characterized by growing and vital religious pluralism, religious skepticism, religious resurgence, and religious ambivalence, peopled by those who are deeply committed to a particular faith tradition and regard it as exclusive, people who are champions of ecumenical and inter-faith efforts, people who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious," and people who are avowedly secular. We should draw a clear distinction between promoting pluralism and

encouraging the development of "open" societies. Both, in the end, reinforce each other, but the proper sequencing is essential. The necessary first step, acceptance of diversity, must come from within a society; it cannot be imposed by outsiders. In this context, Jonathan Z. Smith believes that we need to develop a capacity to make familiar that which at first encounter seems strange. Conversely, he feels that we need the ability to make strange what we have come to think of as all-too-familiar. Smith points out that each of these endeavors needs to be practiced and refined in the service of an urgent civic and academic agendum: that difference be negotiated but never overcome.

Notes

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5 Champion, Francoise. "The Diversity of Religious Pluralism." *International Journal on Multicultural Societies (IJMS),* Vol. 1, No. 2, 1999: 40-44.

6 Ibid., 44.

7 Ibid., 50.

8 Ibid., 45.

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10 Hick, John. *God Has Many Names* (London: Macmillan, 1980): 2-10.

11 Hick, John. "Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine," in *Christianity and Other Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963):180-183.

12 Machacek, David. "The Problem of Pluralism." *Sociology of Religion* 2003, 64:2: 145-61.

13 Peter Berger is an American sociologist and theologian and well known for his work "*The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*."

14 Chaves, Mark and Philip Gorski. "Religious Pluralism and Religious Participation." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2001, Vol. 27 Issue 1: 261- 79.

15 Ibid., 261-263.

16 Beckford, James. "Politics and Religion in England and Wales." *Daedalus* 120, 1991(3): 179-95.

17 **Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000)** is widely known for his work on Islam, especially his commitment to cross-cultural comparison. Smith is perhaps better known for his work on methodology (that is, his studies on how one ought to go about studying religions), his interest in developing a global theology of religious pluralism, as well as his administrative work in helping to establish/revive centers for pursuing the academic study of religion in general, or Islam in particular. Major works: *Toward a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion.*

(Source: http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/aboutrelbiowcsmith.html)

18 Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Maryknowll: Orbis Press, 1981): 61.

19 Ibid., 61.

20 Ibid., 66.

21 **Mircea Eliade** (1907-1986) was a Romanian historian of religion, fiction writer and philosopher. He was a professor at the University of Chicago. As a scholar of religion, he traced the primordial myths and symbols common to different cultures and pointed out the importance of *hierophanies* (manifestations of the sacred in everyday life). (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mircea_Eliade)

22 Tracy, David. *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-religious Dialogue*. (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990): 52-57.

23 Ibid., 53.

24 Ibid., 52-57.

25 Ibid., 56-58.

26 **Ninian Smart (1927-2001)** was classically trained at Oxford University in languages, history, and philosophy. But as a scholar of religion that he made his lasting international mark, notably at (among the many other universities at which he taught) the University of Lancaster, in the UK, and the University of California at Santa Barbara. He played a pivotal role in helping to establish thriving programs in the academic study of

religion--a role that had much to do with his many writings on the proper method for conducting the

public study of religion, as well as his well-known cross-cultural research on many of the world's religions. Major works: *Worldviews: Cross-cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (1982) and *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (1996).

(Source: http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/aboutrelbiosmart.html)

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28 Ibid., 30.

29 Stephen Kaplan is a professor of Indian and Comparative Religions at Manhattan College in Bronx. Kaplan has published articles in a number of edited volumes and journals such as *Philosophy East and West, Journal of Indian Philosophy, Journal of Asian Philosophy, Zygon, Journal of Religious Pluralism*, and *Eastern Buddhist* and another book on Indian and comparative philosophy.

(Source: http://www.manhattan.edu/academics/arts/rels/faculty/stephen.kaplan.shtml)

30 Kaplan, Stephen. *Different Paths, Different Summits: A Model for Religious Pluralism* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002): 4.

31 Ibid., 4-7.

32 **Holography** (from the Greek, Όλος-*holos* whole + γραφή-*graphe* writing) is the science of producing holograms; it is an advanced form of photography that allows an image to be recorded in three dimensions. The technique of holography can also be used to optically store, retrieve, and process information.

(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holography)

33 Kaplan, *Different Paths,* 7-9.

34 **Harold Coward** is a professor in the Department of History at the University of Victoria, Canada, and the founding Director of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society. His areas of concentration have been Indian philosophy and religion, Hinduism, and Comparative Religion. Major works: *Pluralism in the World Religions.* (Source: http://www.mcmaster.ca/ua/alumni/gallery/coward.htm)

35 In this venomous age of Jewish-Arab conflict, it is easy to forget that there once was *another* age in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived shoulder to shoulder in cultural, political and social harmony. During the Golden Age in medieval Spain, Jews, for example, played prominent roles in politics, art, commerce and all major areas of social discourse side by side with their Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters. They did not hate each other's religion. On the contrary, their respective theologians learned from each other and used the wisdom learned to enrich their own religion's discourse.

36 Coward, Harold. *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985): 105-106.

37 Ibid., 107-110.

38 **John Rawls** (1921- 2002) is an American philosopher. He was a professor of political philosophy at Harvard University and author of *A Theory of Justice* (1971), *Political Liberalism*, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, and *The Law of Peoples*. (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Rawls)

39 Rawls, John. *The Law of Peoples: with the Idea of Public Reason Revisited* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999): 20-23.

40 **Seyyed Hossein Nasr** is a professor of Islamic Studies at the George Washington University, Washington D.C. He is one of the most important and foremost scholars of Islamic, Religious and Comparative Studies in the world today. Nasr is the author of over fifty books and five hundred articles which have been translated into several major Islamic, European and Asian languages. Major works: *Religion and the Order of Nature* and *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity.*

(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seyyed_Hossein_Nasr)

41 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. "To Live in a World with No Center—and Many." *Cross Currents* 46/3 (Fall 1996): 318-25.

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42 Ibid., 321.

43 Ibid., 321.

44 Ibid., 321.

45 Ibid., 117.

46 Ibid., 117-18.

47 Ibid., 321.

48 **Martin Marty** has taught in the Divinity School and the Department of History of the University of Chicago since 1963. He specializes in late eighteenth and twentieth-century American religion. Marty is past president of the American Academy of Religion, the American Society of Church History, and the American Catholic Historical Association. The author of over fifty books, Marty has written the three-volume *Modern American Religion.*

(Source: http://divinity.uchicago.edu/faculty/marty.shtml)

49 Marty, Martin. *The One and the Many* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998): 196.

50 Marty, Martin. "This We Can Believe: A Pluralistic Vision." *Religious Education* 75.01, Jan-Feb 1980: 1-7.

51 "Mandela Urges Implementation of Gender Equality," SAPA, March 25, 1998, cited in *World News Connection: Sub-Saharan Africa*, FBIS-AFR-98-084, March 25, 1998.