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A Discourse on Religious Pluralism: A Short Survey

Abdul Salam Muhamad Shukri*
Mohd Abbas Abdul Razak**

Abstract

This paper aims to make a short survey on the discourse of religious pluralism nowadays. The emphasis is made on its inception and development, and the personalities who responsible to disseminate this ideology to the Western and Muslim people all over the world. The research employs the qualitative methodology in which the data collected are analyzed using the textual and content analysis approach. Finding reveals that the liberal among the Muslim scholars embrace the interpretation given by John Hick without complain, while mainstream scholars oppose to it by saying that the true message of the Qur'an is Tawhīd (Oneness of God) and religious tolerance.

Keywords: Pluralism, Religion, tawhīd, Philosophy, Islam.

Introduction

In recent times, one of the most debated issues among people of all walks of life; from the laymen to the learned scholars in the academies is on religious pluralism. Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000) were regarded as early proponents of religious pluralism. Their ideas and works on religious pluralism appeared much more earlier than that of John Hick (1922-2012), Leonard J. Swidler (1929-), Paul F. Knitter (1939-), and Diana L. Eck (1945-). Compared to the intellectual circles in the East, academics in the West embrace the topic on religious pluralism more passionately. In witnessing the enthusiasm shown by academics for this topic, Harvard University was one of the earliest leaning institutions in the world to initiate and establish a centre for the study on religious pluralism. It was in Harvard that the study on pluralism advanced further beyond the scope of religion to the other areas of pluralism. Diana L. Eck, was made

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the director for the Pluralism Project. The topics on pluralism and religious pluralism in many instances sound synonymous.

According to popular beliefs, the terms pluralism and religious pluralism, both refer to an “attitude or policy regarding the diversity of religious belief systems co-existing in society.”¹ However, further studies into the discourse on pluralism and religious pluralism, would surprise one at the speed in which these ideologies are spreading. Experts in the area of pluralism might be able to say that “plurality of religious traditions and cultures has come to characterize every part of the world today.”² In Malaysia two *fatwas* (religious verdict) were issued against religious pluralism. Muslims were asked to stay away from adopting religious pluralism as a philosophy of life. This qualitative study is a small-scale survey on how religious pluralism has been perceived by people at the global level. Particularly, it intends to investigate the impact of pluralism on people living in this modern and digitalized age.

The Concept of Pluralism and Religious Pluralism

The concept and definition of pluralism itself bring a contentious connotation.³ With the rapidity in development and modernization of the world, the definition of pluralism also somehow goes through some changes. In other words, it is quite difficult for any one definition to explain comprehensively what pluralism stands for. To John Hick, who is a leading spokesperson for religious pluralism, it means:

¹ Art. “Religious Pluralism,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_pluralism Retrieved on 4/7/17.

² Diana L. Eck, “What is Pluralism?” (2006) <http://pluralism.org/what-is-pluralism/>

³ According to Mark Silk, religious pluralism can indicate one or more of the following: (1) As the name of the worldview according to which one's religion is not the sole and exclusive source of truth, and thus the acknowledgement that at least some truths and true values exist in other religions. (2) As acceptance of the concept that two or more religions with mutually exclusive truth claims are equally valid. This may be considered a form of either toleration (a concept that arose as a result of the European wars of religion) or moral relativism. (3) The understanding that the exclusive claims of different religions turn out, upon closer examination, to be variations of universal truths that have been taught since time immemorial. This is called Perennialism (based on the concept of *philosophiaperennis*) or Traditionalism. (4) Sometimes as a synonym for ecumenism, i.e., the promotion of some level of unity, co-operation, and improved understanding between different religions or different denominations within a single religion. (5) As a term for the condition of harmonious co-existence between adherents of different religions or religious denominations. (6) As a social norm and not merely a synonym for religious diversity, see Mark Silk, “Defining Religious Pluralism in America: A Regional Analysis,” 612(July 2007), 64–81 as cited in: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_pluralism, retrieved on 4/7/17.

“Stated philosophically such a pluralism [i.e., religious pluralism] is the view that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is manifestly taking place – and taking place, so far as human observation can tell, to much the same extent. Thus the great religious traditions are to be regarded as alternative soteriological “spaces” within which, or “ways” along which, men and woman can find salvation/liberation/ enlightenment/fulfillment.”¹

To illustrate Hick’s case, religions are true in as much as they direct believers to the Real by producing right changes in the believer and are false with regard to their claim to absolute truth. Hick disapproved the idea of proving that only a particular religion is true. Simply put, Hick believes everyone in this world ultimately worships the same God or what he called as the Real. This Ultimate Being is itself beyond categorization although something can be done to describe what it is not. People know God by different names because they have different interpretations and religious experience and as they confined to a particular geographical boundary.

In addition, Hick pointed out that religious pluralism is “the view that the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is taking place in different ways within the context of all the great religious traditions.

There is not merely one way but a plurality of ways of salvation or liberation.”² Truth is still one but responses to it depended on a certain context.

Stanley J. Samartha (1920-2001), an Indian Christian theologian supported Hick’s view when she wrote, “Pluralism does not relativize Truth. It relativizes different responses to Truth which are conditioned

¹ John Hick, “Religious Pluralism,” in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*. Edited by Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach and David Basinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 565 as cited in: <http://www.limitedgovernment.org/publications/pubs/studies/ps-14-7.pdf>

² John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 34 as cited by Haejong Je, A Critical Evaluation of John Hick’s Religious Pluralism in Light of his Eschatological Model, PhD thesis, Andrews University, 2009. <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1069&context=dissertations,1>

by history and culture. It rejects the claim of any particular response to be absolute.”¹ This acknowledgement that no one can hold the truth in the palm of his or her hand is the basic orientation of religious pluralism.

In contrary, Élise Rouméas has a different concept of religious pluralism. For her, there are at least four meanings of religious pluralism, namely theological, sociological, philosophical and political ideal. She argues that religious pluralism as a political ideal aims to have a peaceful interaction among individuals or group of different religious faith and can lead to religious interfaith dialogue. It portrays religious pluralism is a way of living harmoniously within the society and merely beyond the toleration because such differences should be celebrated.²

William A. Galston (1946-) believes it is possible and easy to embrace religious pluralism with the acceptance there are many paths that may lead you to God. This is an expression of no solid answer to reach God because of our limited capacity.³ Yet religious pluralism is here to serve as a meaningful framework for a constructive dialogue among followers of the different religions. It must be further agreed that the followers of every religion have the right to regard their own faith as the true one for them.

The Pluralism Project introduced at the Harvard University then highlights four points where pluralism should begin and guide current thinking on society and culture: First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but the *energetic engagement with diversity*. Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but the *active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*. Third, pluralism is not relativism, but the *encounter of commitments*. Fourth, pluralism is *based on dialogue*. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism.⁴ It is hard to reject such a discourse from influencing the current society.

¹ S. J. Samartha, “The Holy Spirit and People of Other Faiths,” *The Ecumenical Review*, 42:3-4, 1990. 253 as cited by Kosuke Koyama, “A Theological Reflection on Religious Pluralism” http://www.flinders.edu.au/oasis-files/chaplains/geoff_papers/pluralism_Koyama.pdf

² Élise Rouméas, “What is Religious Pluralism?” in Aurélia Bardon, Maria Birnbaum, Lois Lee, Kristina Stoeckl, Olivier Roy (ed.), *Religious Pluralism: A Resource Book* (Florence: European University Institute, 2015), 11-17. <https://spire.sciencespo.fr/hdl/2441/6ugg3blvrk8ampdv99pcaonog5/resources/2015-roumeas-what-is-religious-pluralism.pdf>

³ William A. Galston, “Religious Violence or Religious Pluralism: Islam’s Essential Choice,” *Philosophy & Public Policy Quarterly*, 25: 3 (2005), 12-17 <https://journals.gmu.edu/PPPQ/article/viewFile/180/121>

⁴ Eck, “What is Pluralism?”

John Hick on Religious Pluralism

Over the years, Hick's ideas and understanding of religious pluralism has been presented through many of his publications and by others. He is famously known as one of the leading persons and pioneers on religious pluralism.¹ He described religious pluralism as an attempt to move from exclusivism and inclusivism in order to avoid reductionism. Hick believes that religious pluralism is a position that acknowledges there are pluralistic ways to conceive the Ultimate Reality and plurality of ways to reach the final goals of human existence.² John Hick in his *Interpretation of Religion* discusses faiths exemplify different conceptions and perceptions and responding differently to the Real, and from transitional meaning of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.³

In his *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, Hick also gives four major points in describing his concept of religious pluralism, first notion is about the Real, the second aspect is related to the first one in which the Real is understood by different cultural and religious ways of interpretation. The third is the different interpretation that resulted in the different practices to transform their lives, and the last one is Hick contends that the major religious traditions in the postaxial age aim for the same transformation, as mentioned above from self-centeredness to the Real-centeredness/God-centeredness. It can be seen from these four points, there is only one Real. Hick's idea on pluralism either avoids exclusivism or inclusivism, clearly any ranking of/or hierarchical would return to inclusivism and will destroy pluralism. For Hick, despite having different gods, different concept of reality, different religious practices and so forth, he believes he found something common in all the major religions, which transform human beings.

Contending Ideologies to Pluralism

At the moment, there are many contending ideologies to pluralism at the global level. The very popular among the many will be exclusivism and

¹ John Hick, *God has Many Names*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982); *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990); "A Pluralist View," in *More than One Way?* Ed. by Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 27–92.

² See Stephen Kaplan, *Different Paths, Different Summits: A Model for Religious Pluralism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) [BL85K17D 2002]; Book Review, *Philosophy East and West* 55: 3 (2005), 503.

³ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*.

inclusivism. One would be able to understand what pluralism is all about when it has been compared with exclusivism and inclusivism. Exclusivists assert that there exists only one true religion and there is only one single way to achieve the Ultimate end. In other words, exclusivists claim that only one religion is correct while all others are mistakenly wrong. They believe their particular religion is the ideal and acceptable one and all other religions judged to be incapable to lead to the Truth.¹

For most of its history, Christianity has been an “exclusive” religion. That is, it has taught that salvation is available only to Christians.² The theological position that holds to the finality of the Christian faith in Christ from within Christian tradition, culture of exclusivism or “Particularism.” The finality of Christ means that there is no salvation in all non-Christian religions. In other words, this position holds that only those who response to the Christian gospel may be saved.

The basis of this exclusivism is based on the Aristotelian concept of truth as one and not many. Exclusivists regard all other religious claims to be false and invalid. To the exclusivists, Christian revelation is the only true revelation. They too hold the belief that salvation is through Christ alone.

There are at least two main Christian thinkers involved in the discourse on exclusivism.³

First, Hendrick Kraemar (1888-1965) in his *Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (1930) maintained, “God has revealed the way, the truth and the life in Jesus, and wills this to be known throughout the world.” God sent revelation outside Christ also but in “a broken troubled way, in reason, in nature and in history.” Karl Barth (1886-1968) maintained that salvation is only possible through Christ and other religions will be erased. Since people question “what happened if they haven’t heard of Christ or heard but decided to reject? This means there

¹ Kaplan, *Different Paths, Different Summits*

² The “exclusive” religion mentions clearly in the Bible as follows: “I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:15); “Then Jesus told them, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:29); “I [Jesus] am the way and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6); “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” (Mark 16:15-16)

³ Hendrick Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 3rd ed. (1956, reprinted 1969). Encyclopedia Britannica calls this book “the classic modern statement of a conservative position.” More recent scholar S. J. Samartha (ed.), *Faith in the Midst of Faiths: Reflections on Dialogue in Community* (1977) further supports this position and the World Council of Churches also produced this work.

is no such thing as universal saving will of God. Barth says there is cost at the end of time all will believe in Christ.

Traditionally, inclusivism brings meaning of all people may be included in the one form of salvation brought by one particular salvific agent even if they are unaware of that.¹ In addition, inclusivism opposes the idea of there is only one religion but other religions participate or partly reveal some truths.² Inclusivism means the belief that God is present in non-Christian religions to save the adherents through Christ. Salvation is possible in other religions although Christian represents the correct salvation. The inclusivist view has given rise to the concept of the anonymous Christian by which is understood that an adherent of a particular religion whom God saves through Christianity, but who personally neither know the Christ of Bible nor has converted to Biblical Christianity.

The Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner (1904-1984) popularized this position in his “Theological Investigations.” According to him, those who can be saved are included individuals non-Christians and non-Christian religious tradition. He however, hold four positions, namely (1) Christianity as an absolute religion exists in history, these who have before, (2) non-Christian religious traditions are valid after has been preached, they no longer legitimate, (3) they are ‘anonymous Christians, and (4) other religions will survive.

One of the important issues that Rahner raised is about that salvation of those who have never had the opportunity to listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ. According to Rahner, people then can be saved apart from allegiance to the Christian Church. It is God in Christ who reached out to the individual in his own personal religious history to save him. Rahner used the term ‘anonymous’ to denote people who experience the grace of God regardless to what religion they belong to. There are two axioms of inclusivism, namely (1) Salvation is through Christ alone, and (2) God wills the whole world to be saved. Consequently, God saves people through Christ alone; however, he makes this possible through ways that extend to all humanity.

¹ Kaplan, *Different Paths, Different Summits*; see further Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (eds.), *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Zondervan, 1996). This book grew out of a 1992 Theology Conference at Wheaton College on pluralism and inclusivism. Contributors are John Hick (pluralism), Clark Pinnock (inclusivism), Alister McGrath (particularism), and W. Gary Phillips and R. Douglas Geivett together (exclusivism); Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (American Society of Missiology Series, No 7) (Orbis, 1985); John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (eds.), *Christianity and Other Religions* (Oneworld Publications, 2001)

² Haslina Ibrahim, 2010.

The more contemporary approach to the others is pluralism.¹ As defined earlier, it is the belief that all religions of the world are true and equally valid in their communication of the truth about God, the world and salvation. As known earlier, John Hick is the chief expounder of this view in his book *God and the Universe of Faith* (1973). This is the popular view that all religions lead to the same God and all ways that religion had paved lead to heaven. Christianity is then not the one and only way of salvation, but one among many.

To a pluralist like Hick, Christianity is not the absolute, unique, and the final way to God. While pluralists assert the validity of all religions, they also deny the finality of all religions. According to Hick, in the evolutionary scheme of things in which at isolated ages and places, early religions were succeeded by the ones that came later. At times it can be a message more comprehensive than the one that came earlier on. All this messages are the same but came at a particular time for a distinctively different community of people. Hick challenges the popular view that says Christ or Christianity must be seen as the center of religion and the only way to salvation. Rather, he says, God must be seen at the center of religions. The pluralistic contention is that all religions are fundamentally the same though superficially different.

Islamic Perspective on Religious Pluralism

There exist many varied interpretations on the subject of religious pluralism among Muslim scholars. As for this reason the debate on this subject is still an ongoing thing. Since the subject is a highly contested one, the debate on religious pluralism among the elites in Islam is something that has not come to a consensus. Not only in Islam, perhaps a similar situation could also be found in other religious communities of the world. As a religion based on fairness and justice, Islam encourages the treating of people in a dignified and humane way. By abiding fairness and justice, a Muslim country can operate in a harmonious manner without any religious tension among its masses; Muslims and non-Muslims. Islamic annals are replete with many examples of how Muslims co-existed with others in a harmonious way. A classic example to state here will be during the Golden Age of the Muslims (750-1258). In cities like Baghdad

¹ Among important scholars and works is Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (1981); John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (1982); John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (1987), see:

http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/beliefs/other_religions.htm (Retrieved on 27/10/14)

and Cordoba, scholars and people lived and worked together for the Muslim empires of that time. Muslims, Jews, Christians and even fire worshippers worked as a team for the expansion of knowledge by conducting scientific research and translating ancient manuscripts from Greek, Persian, Indian and other languages into Arabic. The other example will be on how the Prophet of Islam treated people of different beliefs other than Islam. He made many agreements with non-Muslims all leading towards establishing a harmonious society. A society based on the philosophy of loving, caring and sharing. Through such an understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims, people lived peacefully in mutual tolerance and respect of one another's religion. Like the Prophet, the four caliphs and jurists that came after the demise of the Prophet also treated the non-Muslims with all fairness and justice. Past Muslim history elucidates one thing clearly that Muslims while upholding their religious beliefs, did not fail to provide safety, security and protection to the lives and property of the non-Muslims living under their rule. Moreover, the rulers in Muslim empires have paid serious attention to the rights of the non-Muslims, particularly their individual rights as citizens and the right to practice their religion without intimidation from the larger Muslim population.¹ Abdul Halim wrote:

“The pluralistic nature of Islam is evident from the fact that the duty of a Muslim is only educating and passing the knowledge of Islam, near and far. Al Quran states: And admonish your nearest kinsmen [26: 214]. The responsibility ends with educating, transmitting and communicating faith. To pass on the message is to call and invite people to the way of Allah. Conversion is something that only Allah can alone accomplish. It is an affair of the heart and does not lie within anyone else's purview and jurisdiction. It is only the prerogative of Allah. This is the real meaning of *Litakūnū Shuhadā 'Ala al-Nas*- bear witness to the message before mankind.

The pluralistic nature of Islam is further established by its principle of justice in all circumstances, in relation to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Al Quran states: O you

¹ Shah Abdul Halim, “Islam: Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue,” *News from Bangladesh*, 8 Jan. (2007) as cited by Syed Kamran Mirza, “Islam: Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue – A Debate; Part-1,” 23 Feb, 2007.

http://www.realislam.com/kamranmirza/islam_pluralism_interfaith_dialogue_debate.htm

who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety: and fear Allah. For Allah is well-acquainted with all that you do [5:8]. The principle of justice in Islam constitutes the fundamental norm after faith in the oneness of Allah (*Tawhid*).’’¹

According to Rifat Atay and Adnan Aslan, although Islam is different from other religions and ideologies in many ways, but it tolerate the existence of other religions. As a result of such a principle, Muslims managed to rule for thousands of years over Christians and Jews, and it did not attempt a systematic “Islamization” of the adherents of these faiths.² History witnessed after the conquest of Jerusalem in 638 CE, Caliph ‘Umar had issued a covenant in which, among other things, he promised the Christian residents of the city “the surety of their persons, their goods, their churches, the crosses and the cult in general.”³ Ali Ihsan Yitik begins his article by pointing out that the relation between Islam and pluralism seems “a little bit complicated.” This is because there are “some verses in The Koran for pluralism and at the same time we have some verses against.”⁴

With regard to religious pluralism, Mahmoud Ayoub emphasizes that Islam promotes a peaceful coexistence with others, and at the same time provides freedom to non-Muslims to practice their own religion. This Islamic approach becomes a prerequisite for a multi-religious society to exist in a peaceful manner.⁵ Ayoub maintains that the “Qur’an presents its view of religious pluralism in a somewhat progressive manner. In a preliminary statement it simply enumerates the religions known to the Prophet’s listeners and leaves the question of their truth for God to judge on the Day of Resurrection. It states: “Surely those who have accepted faith [that is the Muslims], those who are Jews, the Sabaeans, the

¹ Abdul Halim, “Islam: Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue”

² See for discussions, Rifat Atay, *Religious Pluralism and Islam: A Critical Examination of John Hick’s Pluralistic Hypothesis*, Ph.D Thesis, University of St. Andrews, Scotland, UK, 27-54; Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998)

³ Abu Ja‘far Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-Rusul wal-Muluk*, Vol. 3, 609 as cited Ali Ihsan Yitik, “Islam and Pluralism: Does Quran Approve Religious Pluralism?” *Journal of Religious Culture*, 68 (2004), 1-5 (4) <http://web.uni-frankfurt.de/irenik/rekultur68.pdf>

⁴ Yitik, *Islam and Pluralism*, 1.

⁵ Mahmoud Ayoub, “Religious Pluralism and the Qur’an,”

https://www.iiit.org/uploads/4/9/9/6/49960591/religious_pluralism_and_the_qur.pdf

Christians, the Magians and those who have associated other gods with God, God will judge among them on the Day of Resurrection. God is witness over all things [Q. 22:17]. It should be observed that the verse under consideration first lists the legitimate religions and then mentions those who associate other beings or things with the worship of God alone as people without a legitimate religion.”¹

It is important that a balance is maintained in the society based on mutual respect, love and compassion. At the same time it should reject all types of arrogance, whether it is material, intellectual, etc. Establishing such a balance between different nations and communities is possible when members of the community learn and share knowledge of one others religion, culture and custom. Al-Qur’an states human beings are created with different genders, male and female and made them into different nations and tribe with a special purpose of knowing each other (Q. 49:13).

Establishing a harmonious relation between people has been repeatedly emphasized in Islam. The Quran invites all to the way of Allah with wisdom, beautiful preaching and argument with the best and most gracious way (Q. 16:125). In other words, Mahmut Aydin states that al-Qur’an and the Muslim annals provide ample evidence on how religious pluralism can be observed in a fairly positive manner. Sociologically, Muslims have set a good example on how they can live in full integration with people of other faith. At the time when Prophet Muhammad established Madinah as an Islamic state, he recognized the rights of the non-Muslims. For the peaceful co-existence of all faith groups in the state, he laid down the principles for peace to prevail and for the security of Madinah. This agreement between the Muslims and others living in the city of the Prophet is more popularly known as “the Charter of Madinah.”²

Certain verses in the Qur’an form the basis for religious freedom in Islam. The two most important verses state that “There is no compulsion in religion.” (Q. 2:256) and “And if your Lord willed, all who are in the earth would have believed together. Will you (Muhammad) compel men

¹ Ayoub, “Religious Pluralism and the Qur’an”

² See Aydin, Mehmet S. “Islam and the Challenges of Pluralism.” 3 November 2005, <http://www.cie.ugent.be/maydinen1.htm> (accessed May II, 2013) as cited by ArifKemil Abdullah, *The Qur’an and Normative Religious Pluralism: A Thematic Study of the Qur’an* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2017), 240, n. 18; Mahmut Aydin, Religious Pluralism: A Challenge for Muslims-A Theological Evaluation,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-98313413/religious-pluralism-a-challenge-for-muslims-a-theological>; “Chapter Four Pluralism in Practice: Historical Manifestation,” http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/52375/1/1111_chapter%204.pdf

until they are believers?” (Q. 10:99). These verses acted as guarantors of religious freedom in Islamic communities throughout history. The Qur'an excludes compulsion in choosing what to believe. If one accepts the truth, it is for his or her own good, and if he or she sticks to error, it is to his or her own detriment.¹ It affirms that as far as matters of faith are concerned, they are between individuals and God, and no other person can intervene.

However, in the theological perspective, Muslims tend to remain claim to hold the absolute truth by developing the critical remarks of the Qur'an on non-believer and support them with a firm belief in the Oneness of God. According to Rifat Atay, Islam is a religion that holds the absolute truth while others are considered to be in error despite the traces of truth that may remain with them. Muslims are of the full conviction that Islam is the final and comprehensive religion for all humanity to follow. Moreover, in the Qur'an, Islam has been mentioned as a way of life (*al-Dīn*). This belief of the Muslims has been vividly expressed in a number of verses in the Qur'an; 3: 19, 85; 5:3).

Mohammad Hashim Kamali in his “Diversity and Pluralism” concedes that *tawhid* or Oneness of God is the cornerstone of the Islamic teachings. The Muslim attitude towards defending “the uniqueness of the Qur'an as the Word of God”, as the final revealed faith of God and as the most perfect and complete form of all theistic religions in most instances do not go well with the spirit of religious pluralism. The best Muslims would agree with religious pluralism when it calls for tolerance and coexistence. The Muslim attitude of being tolerant in acknowledging the rights of others to practice their religion does not mean to say that they accept the practices in other religions to be equal and same to the practices in Islam.²

Pluralism is not the same as diversity or plurality of religions. People of different religious or cultural backgrounds may well be present in a place. Pluralism does not simply aim at tolerance of the other but entails active effort to gain an understanding of the others. One can tolerate a neighbour whom one remains thoroughly ignorant. That may well be preferable to conflict, yet it still falls short of active pluralism, which means acknowledging and engaging differences without any attempt to impose hegemony.

¹ SitiZubaidah Ismail & Muhamad ZahiriAwang Mat, Faith and Freedom: The Quranic Notion of Freedom of Religion vs. the Act of Changing Religion and Thoughts on the Implications for Malaysia, *Religions* 2016, 7(7), 88; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7070088>

² Mohammad HashimKamali, “Diversity and Pluralism: A Qur'ānic Perspective,” *Islam and Civilization Renewal*, 1: 1 (2009), 27-54

The Mufti of Perak, Malaysia, Datuk Harussani Zakaria advised the Muslims to be prudently cautious of the threats of religious pluralism and liberalism particularly that can impinge into the *tawhidic* nature of Islam. In his keynote address on “Purifying Islam from Liberalism and Pluralism” at the Ulama Convention 2006, he highlighted that “discussions on polygamy, the faraidh system (law of inheritance), revision of the Quran, setting up of an Inter-Faith Commission and abolishment of Article 121 (1A) of the Federal Constitution, were getting louder as more Malaysians were embracing liberalism and pluralism. He says, “If left unchecked, liberalism and pluralism will be difficult to control, ...”.¹ This is due to the implication of this idea that has proven to lead towards liberal and secular approach in understanding religion, particularly to the Muslims. It has subsequently led to crucial debates and controversies mainly to Muslim communities in particular, religious representatives and also academics.

As a conclusion, pluralism in Islam differed from the definition given to the world by the West. Muslims celebrate the differences among people in terms of knowledge, opinions, preferences, and also in religious freedom. Islam gives its followers the freedom to choose but according to the guidance of God. For instance, Islam does not force anyone to embrace Islam but guide by giving indication that Islam is the true and complete religion. Although Islam celebrates the differences but it does not go to the extent of accepting those opinions as the main concept in Islam. The concept of pluralism, as highlighted by John Hick, for instance, is different fundamentally from the main concept of Oneness of God (*tawhid*) in Islam. From the perspective of religious tolerance in Islam, people are given a fair opportunity to practice their religion appropriately without any fear or terror with the limitation of not disturbing other faiths. Though tolerance in Islam is directed towards creating a prosperous and healthy society, but it does not mean others can interpret the religion in ways that are contrary to the true message of the Qur'an.

Critiques on Religious Pluralism

In observing the interest shown by the masses in the Muslim world and West to the topic on religious pluralism draws the attention of some

¹ Mazni Mustafa, “Mufti: Beware of Pluralism and Liberalism,” *The Star Online*, June 13th, 2006, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2006/06/13/mufti-beware-of-pluralism-and-liberalism/>; see also Marina Munira Abdul Mutaliba & Mashitah Sulaiman, “Understanding Religious Pluralism in Malaysia: A Christian and Muslim Debate,” *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, Special Issue – Islam and Contemporary Issues*, Vol. 7 (2017), 175-88

concern parties, particularly the academics to dwell on the issues related to religious pluralism. What seems to be an easy issue for academics to tackle on the surface might be a tricky one as they get deeper into the discourse on religious pluralism, particularly when the topic is viewed from a religious perspective. Till to this day, many scholars have given their opinion and critiques on religious pluralism. Osman Bakar, a contemporary Muslim scholar, explains the Islamic position on pluralism and diversity of cultures in today's context in the following terms: "Islam conceives of plurality and diversity within a theological framework. It affirms God as the transcendent source of plurality and diversity in both the natural and the human worlds. It also affirms the spiritual and moral purpose of human plurality and diversity, namely: mutual recognition and mutual understanding in the name of God. A major theme in Islamic pluralism is the idea of unity in diversity, which in fact, characterizes every domain of divine creation. God manifests His wisdom and power through unity in diversity in creation. On the human plane, man should strive for unity in diversity in his construction of a society and civilization. Generally speaking, Islamic civilization has proved to be more successful in managing pluralism and realizing unity within diversity through its worldwide Ummah."¹ According to him, the notion of religious pluralism is very close to the concept of unity in Islam. He believes that God has created human beings in various forms and races and they will be brought back to Him. In another article, "Islam and the Challenge of Diversity and Pluralism",² Bakar discusses religious pluralism from the perspective of tolerance by stating it clearly that there was a greater tolerance of diversity and pluralism in the Muslim distant past than there is right now and calls for a change in the Muslim society for the betterment of the Ummah. This view has been adapted by many Muslims specifically in multi-diverse societies like Malaysia and Indonesia, with the intention to restore the unity, peace and harmony among members of the society. Hence, pluralism is often regarded as "the most effective form of tolerance" in addressing religious differences in this world. Even tolerance is considered as one

¹ Osman Bakar, "The Qur'an on Interfaith and Inter-Civilization Dialogue: Interpreting a Divine Message for Twenty-First Century Humanity." Paper presented at conference on Philosophy in the New Age of Religious and Cultural Pluralism at ISTAC, IIUM, Malaysia, July 7, 2007, see "Theocentrism and Pluralism: Are They Poles Apart?" *Policy Perspectives*, 5:3, July-December, 2008.

² Osman Bakar, "Islam and the Challenge of Diversity and Pluralism: Must Islam Reform Itself?" *Islam and Civilisational Renewal- Special Issue: Islam and Pluralism*, 1:1 (2009), 55-73.

of the most important principles in pluralism. This is tied together with the claims of every religion is true. However, pluralism is actually is not a new concept itself but grouped together with the ideas such as humanism, atheism, and so on.¹

The type of religious pluralism promoted by John Hick took him out from the exclusive Catholic concept of truth and God. His assumption that all religions lead towards salvation made him lose faith in his own religion. He believes that the exclusive status of a religion paves the way for division and only religious pluralism can bring mutual understanding, respect and harmony within a society. In contrast to John Hick, Uthman El Muhammady a Sunni scholar believes that a society can overcome religious polarization when its members understand and look at religion in a broader perspective. The members must fully understand the role of religion as something “related to human sincerity, corrective advice, good counsel and sincere conduct (*al-dīn al-naṣīḥah*) as well as an act of submission to the ethics of differences of opinion (*adāb al-‘ikhtilāf*)”.

Apart from Hick, some pluralists from among the Muslim Ummah gave their justification on the possible practice of religious pluralism by quoting a stanza from Rumi’s (1207-1273) poem. With such evidence, they claim that the Great Poet himself was a religious pluralist.² This claim seems quite the opposite to the popular opinion on Rumi. To many in the Muslim world, Rumi was a Sunni mystic belonging to the Hanafi school of thought. On top of it, he was a strict adherent of the Islamic Shari‘ah. There was a time; Rumi was asked by a man on the so-called claim that Jesus was the incarnation of God the Almighty in the human form. Rumi responded to him by asking logical counter questions on how a person possibly could think of God as a thin man with a few meters high was chased by people with the intention to kill him and was it possible that God the Creator of the universe was treated in such a manner? Through Rumi’s response one could conclude that he did not agree to the

¹ Mohamed Sabir Jamaludin, Nik Mohd Zaim Ab Rahim, Mohd Al’ikhsan Ghazali, Azizi Shukri Abdul Shukor, “Respon Ulama Kontemporer Menanggapi Beberapa Isu Dalam Pluralisme Agama di Malaysia,” *Toleransi*, 5:2 (2013), 100-106 (100).

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² See for example, Yusuf Dadoo, “Syncretism, Universalism and Religious Pluralism in the Poetry of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī,” *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 17: 2 (2004), 103-121

concept of Jesus is God born in the human flesh and blood. Given this story on the background, how could one assume that Rumi believed all concepts on God regardless monotheistic or trinity are leading to the same Supreme Being and able to provide mankind salvation in the hereafter.¹

Another prominent scholar in Islam, Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi (1921-1986) emphasized the idea of natural religion (*din al-fitrah*), which is a natural endowment for humankind. In this view, al-Faruqi explained that Islam hold every human being naturally born with the *fitrah*. He strongly believes that people are bestowed with capacity to know God. He justified with the hadith of the Prophet: "Every child that is born, is born in the state of being a Muslim (to worship none but Allah alone) and his parents convert him to Judaism or Christianity or Magianism as an animal delivers a perfect baby animal. Do you find it mutilated?" (al-Bukhari). He argues that all religions are initially based upon religion of God. However, departing from the original religious concept, the primordial and innate monotheism is the work of culture and history that led to existence of plurality of religions.²

Last but not least, two *fatwas* (religious verdict) were issued on liberalism and religious pluralism in Malaysia, one by JAKIM and the other by MAIS.³ In the *fatwa* issued by MAIS, Sisters in Islam (SIS Forum) was identified as one of the NGO's that stand in favour of

¹ Mohamed Ajmal Abdul Razak al-Aidrus, "Hick's Pluralism and Rumi's Mathnawi: the Continued Propagation of Misappropriated Lines," *Al-Shajarah*, 16:1 (2011), 141-150; see also, Ayatullah Murtadha Mutahhari, *Islam and Religious Pluralism* (The Islamic Publishing House (IPH))

<https://www.al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/17516>

² Haslina Ibrahim, *Diversity of Religions: An Assessment of the Christian and Muslim Encounters with the Philosophy of Religious Pluralism*, Unpublished Ph.Dthesis, International Islamic University Malaysia, 2005; Haslina Ibrahim, *Exploring Religious Pluralism: Christian and Muslim Responses* (Kuala Lumpur: ISSI, 2016); Mohd Sharif, M. F., Ahmad Sabri Bin Osman, "'Din Al-Fitrah' According to al-Faruqi and His Understandings about Religious Pluralism," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8: 3 (2018), 663–676.

³ JAKIM, "Aliran Pemikiran Liberal: Hukum and Implikasinya kepada Islam di Malaysia (2006)," in *Kompilasi Pandangan Hukum Muzakarah Jawatankuasa Fatwa Majlis Kebangsaan bagi Hal Ehwal Ugama Islam Malaysia*, 5 ed. (Putrajaya: Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, 2015), 18-20.

http://www.islam.gov.my/images/ePenerbitan/KOMPILASI_MUZAKARAH_MKI_2016.pdf; MAIS (The Selangor Islamic Religious Council), *Fatwa Committee of Selangor on SIS Forum and any holding on liberalism and religious pluralism*, 17 July 2014 <http://www.muftiselangor.gov.my/awam/fatwa/fatwa-terkini/362-fatwa-pemikiran-liberalisme-dan-pluralisme-agama>

liberalism and religious pluralism in the country. Some experts in law in Malaysia feel that legal action can be taken against them by the government for promoting liberal ideas such as pluralism. If that happened, then it will be the first time in Malaysia whereby the religious authority has taken action to prohibit on such a teaching like pluralism in the country. However, till today no religious prosecution ever took place in Malaysia although there are groups that support liberalism and religious pluralism in the country, like Sisters in Islam, G 25, Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF) and the Bar Council.¹

Conclusion

This study has indicated that the term religious pluralism is somehow a loaded term with many varied interpretations. Due to this reason, one can hardly find a general consensus among religious scholars and academicians on what religious pluralism is all about. For some, religious pluralism means people of different faith co-exist peacefully without any hatred or intimidation towards others although they have different concepts of God. To others, pluralism means all religions are the same, acceptable and heading towards the same God as He has manifested in different forms and ways to different people. Despite the absence of a consensus, the debate on religious pluralism is pretty much alive and an ongoing thing at the global level. In realizing the nature and intricacies that revolve around this topic, the researcher feels that the discourse on religious pluralism can hardly be finalized. This research has indicated that in the context of the Qur'an and the Muslims, the term religious tolerance is more appropriate and acceptable than religious pluralism.

A tiny minority of Muslim scholars who are in favour of the liberal movement of the West subscribe to the understanding and interpretation of pluralism given by John Hick, while the vast majority of the scholars are in favour of the concept religious tolerance enshrined in the Qur'an. The so-called liberal Muslim scholars use many out of context Qur'anic verses to justify their advocacy of religious pluralism though their ideas have been criticized by mainstream Islam. This research has highlighted that interpretations on what are meant as religious pluralism, plurality of religion and religious tolerance differs in many ways depending on the Muslim scholars' background, knowledge and understanding on the

¹ NajiahAthirahbintiJamaludin, *The Presence of Liberalism and Religious Pluralism in Malaysia: An Analysis*, unpublished Master thesis IRKH (Gombak: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2017), 4.

subject. While the debate on pluralism goes on, mainstream Islam calls for the Islamic concept of Tawhid (Oneness of God) which forms the cornerstone of the teachings of the Qur'an to be upheld. At the same time, it permits the right of others to practice their religion according to their religious beliefs. Not only that, mainstream Islam calls for the Muslim governments to provide safety, security and protection for the non-Muslims. Moreover, non-Muslims living under the Muslim rule must be treated equally with due respect as citizens like the rest of the population. They should be allowed to have their own places of worship and the freedom to practice their religion. All in all, Islam as a religion of peace calls Muslims for a peaceful co-existence with people of other faith.

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