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Varieties of Religious Pluralism

Olusegun Noah Olawoyin¹

ABSTRACT

Religious Pluralism is one of many forms of pluralism in contemporary globalised world. Some others include ethnic pluralism, value pluralism, doctrinal pluralism, ethical pluralism, political pluralism. Religious pluralism is, however, one of the most important in contemporary society, considering globalization and the role of religions in many conflicts. It has its root in political liberalism. Religious pluralism is a hot debate in social sciences and in Theology and Religious Studies. This paper argues that religious pluralism, which is an acceptance of plurality as normative, is not a monolithic theory. The different religious context in which it is being discussed, the different disciplinary and philosophical influences resulted in various and even contradictory types. However, this paper is a 'mapping' of the contour of contemporary discussions. Critically reviewing relevant literature, two major theories of religious pluralism were identified: identist and differential/complementary. Each of these also has subdivision.

Keywords: Conflicts, dialogue, relativism, absolutism, religious pluralism.

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1.0 Introduction

“Pluralism” and its cognates, “plural”, “plurality” and “pluralistic” have become very current in modern discussions, both in the practical ways of life and in the humanistic studies. In practical life, it is used in the discussions about ‘many’ races, nations, cultures, religions, etc. that have to live together as a society today. In technical usage, the philosophies of Anaxagoras and especially of Leucippus and

¹ Department of Religious Studies, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria, Email: olusegunolawoyin@eksu.edu.ng.

Democritus in the ancient times, and William James in the modern times are technically termed 'pluralistic'. In this technical sense, pluralism is "the metaphysical doctrine that reality consists in many reals." (Hunnex, 1986: 74; Williams, 1981; Russell, 1961: 79-80). In contemporary scholarly discussions, pluralism is the 'ism' of plurality, the affirmation or acceptance of difference. There could be differences within society without the differences being accepted as the norm. This is plurality. Pluralism, however, is an evaluation of the fact of difference: the acceptance of the difference as ideal.

Pluralism as it is being considered today has many forms, such as religious pluralism, ethnic pluralism, (Otite, 1990; Schermerhorn, 1978), political pluralism (Baskin, 1971; Manley, 1976: 23-26), moral or ethical pluralism (Parekh, 1996: 117-154), value pluralism (Skorupski, 1996: 101-116), cultural pluralism and philosophical pluralism (Evans, 1996: 47-60). Among all the different forms of pluralism under discussion today, none is as virile as religious pluralism.

Religious pluralism as recognition of independent validity of other religions had obtained in many societies in many parts of the world and at different periods in history. Examples are the ancient Roman Empire, India and many ancient empires in Africa. However, there had been religions also, that were making exclusive claims, such as in many branches of Christianity and Islam. Because these consider their religions to be the only true one, or the best, they seek to convert others. The increase in travel from the 17th century was an increase in evangelisation of the world. Christian missionaries from Europe and the Americas had travelled to many parts of the world for evangelisation. Ironically, missionary works also created awareness in many parts of the world of the value of their culture and religion, such as in India and Africa.

There had been theoretical discussions of religious pluralism before the 17th Century European Enlightenment. Rizvi (2006: iii) cited Qur'an chapter 109 as one of the earliest messages of peaceful coexistence: "O unbelievers! Neither do I worship what you worship; nor do you worship what I worship. Neither am I going to worship what you worship; nor are you going to worship what I worship. To you shall be your religion, and to me shall be my religion". The theoretical discussion, however, gained in pace after the acceptance of political liberalism in the West. According to Diana Eck, pluralism is "a direct concomitant to religious freedom. They go together." (Eck, 2005a: x) Other factors also accelerated the discussions on the nature and validity of religious pluralism. The most important of these factors are the fast trend of globalisation in the 20th century and the involvement of religions in many conflicts in the world, such as between India and Pakistan, Israel and Palestinians, Northern Ireland, Nigeria, Central African Republic, Egypt, Iraq and Syria. As Bernhardt has said, "... at present, the fronts between the religions are hardening in a dramatic way." (Bernhardt, 1994: ix), and Kung observed, "There will be no peace in the world until there is peace between the religions." (Kung, 1991: 108).

In the process of theoretical discussions among scholars on religious pluralism, different forms of pluralism had been proposed and justified. The purpose of this paper is to map the terrain of these contemporary discussions, to classify the different proposals. The method adopted is descriptive review of relevant literature. By this method, it was discovered that, religious pluralism is being discussed in two major disciplines. The first is in theology/Religious Studies, and the second is among social theorists – sociologists and political scientists. The former are discussing the implication of religious pluralism for individual religion, belief and practices; the latter are discussing the impacts of religious pluralism on civil society and democratic politics. (Banchoff, 2007). Furthermore, it was discovered that, within each of these broad disciplines, especially the former (Theology and Religious Studies), there are varieties of proposals.

The paper proceeds thus; the next section, which is the second, clarifies the concept of religious pluralism, comparing and contrasting it with related concepts. The third section presents the varieties of religious pluralism. The section focusses primarily on the discussions in religious studies, although that among social scientists is not left out. This is followed by the conclusion of the paper.

2.0 Religious pluralism and related concepts

Religious Pluralism becomes prominent in the twentieth century as a response to two other views of relationship to other religions: exclusivism and inclusivism. (Eck, 2005b: 21-50). The debate started among Western (Christian) thinkers. Exclusivism is the view that only one religion possesses the truth, and that there can be no truth or salvation outside it. It is based on the belief that the revelation of the religion is the final; no other one is possible. An inclusivist recognises partial truths in other religions, but considers his or hers as absolutely true. In contrast to exclusivism and inclusivism, pluralism is the recognition of the independent validity of other ways, religions, cultures, moralities, races, etc. Pluralism should also be distinguished from plurality. Raimundo Pannikar explicitly states this: "Pluralism does not mean plurality." (Panikkar, 1992: 109) Clark Pinnock seems to confuse the two (Pinnock, 1990: 368). Religious plurality refers to "the fact of difference," (Archard, 1996: 1) or "the empirical reality of diverse religious systems in the world." (Demarest, 1991: 135) David Tracy distinguishes the two thus: "Plurality is a fact. Pluralism is one of the many possible evaluations of that fact." (Tracy, 1987: 2) Religious pluralism should also however be distinguished from religious relativism. The latter is "the claim that no religious belief is absolutely true." (O'Keefe, 1996: 62) Rather, pluralism "rests on an assumption that there are some underlying and fundamental religious truths which are presented in a variety of cultural forms in various religious belief systems." (O'Keefe, 1996: 62).

Another related concept is dialogue. In dialogue, talking across religions is the main focus, and it is with the intention to encourage tolerance, where there had been conflicts. Pluralism goes further than dialogue. Although talking across religions is not discouraged, yet it is not emphasised. The reason for this is simple, the equal validity of the different religions is assumed. What remains for a theorist of pluralism to do is to spell out the meaning of the equality in practice. As Kenny and Mala have pointed out, Dialogue is taught and encouraged in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria because of the recent religious controversies and conflicts in Nigeria. (Kenny & Mala, 1986: 104).

According to David Ray Griffin, those who accept religious pluralism accept two affirmations, a positive one and a negative one.

The negative affirmation is the rejection of religious absolutism, which means rejecting the a priori assumption that their own religion is the only one that provides saving truths and values to its adherents, that it alone is divinely inspired, that it has been divinely established as the only legitimate religion, intended to replace all others. The positive affirmation, which goes beyond the negative one, is the acceptance of the idea that there are indeed religions other than one's own that provide saving truths and values to their adherents. (Griffin 2005: 3)

3.0 Varieties of religious pluralism

In the field of Theology and the Philosophy of Religion, John Hick is considered the greatest advocate of religious pluralism. His proposal is found primarily in his major book, *An Interpretation of Religion* (Hick, 1989), but also in many of his other publications (e.g. Hick, 1980, 1985, 1993a, 1993b, 1995, 2001). Hick's theory of religious pluralism is philosophical, reconstructing the concept of Transcendent in the religions. His focus is on the religions he terms, 'post-axial religions'. These are religions that began between 800 BCE and 200 CE. They consist of world's major religions. Islam is considered as an offshoot of Judaism and Christianity. According to Hick, these post-axial faiths focussed on "transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness". The transformation occurs are transcendently oriented. Hick used Kant's philosophy to account for differences between the religions on the conception of the Transcendent/Ultimately Real. The Ultimately Real/Transcendent/Real is the *noumenon*, the reality in itself, which cannot be conceived as it is. Different human perception and conception of the Real, which are due to different cultural contexts, account for the differences between the religions. The different conceptions are the

phenomena. Hick found support for his proposal in the religions themselves. They all distinguished between the Real as it is in itself, and as it is perceived and conceived.

In a negative response to John Hick's form of religious pluralism, Gavin D'Costa outlines five types of religious pluralism (D'Costa, 1996: 223-232). That of John Hick is the first, called "philosophical pluralism." Other types include the *practical* or *pragmatic* religious pluralism of Paul Knitter, Houston Smith and Seyyed Hossein Nasr's "perennial philosophy" or *esoteric* pluralism, Sarvapelli Radhakrishnan's mystical unity of religions in which the implicit pluralism within Hindu Brahmanism and Advaita Vedanta was brought into surface, and the Dalai Lama's (of Tibetan Buddhism) tolerant pluralism. Of these, John Hick's and similar ones had provoked more responses.

It was Hick and Paul Knitter in an edited volume, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, (Hick & Knitter, 1992) who thrust the issue of religious pluralism into modern intellectual discussion. The book was the result of a Conference held at the Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California from March 7-8, 1986. The conference was highly organised and the contributors specially chosen. The motivating factor of the organisers was that, Christians had started to realise that religious plurality is a fact; more than that, they are feeling that other religions are as vital as theirs and influential in the modern world. The non-Christian religions have depths and beauty, which an unprejudiced observer can see, and the religions are attractive to many.

The title itself is provocative to many Christian thinkers. Christian uniqueness is called a 'myth'. This implies that it is a lie or false. However, it is explained in the phrase as meaning that Christian uniqueness needs to be reinterpreted; in Bultmannian term, it needs to be 'demythologised'. The uniqueness that needs to be reinterpreted is the "definiteness, absoluteness, normativeness, superiority of Christianity in comparison with other religions of the world." If Christianity is unique at all, it must be only in the sense that there is only one of it; and this every other religious tradition enjoys.

We refer to the contributors of this volume as 'ultra' liberals of Christian tradition. This, they themselves realised. Knitter observes in the preface that on the issue of the relation of Christianity to the non-Christian religions, the conservatives are exclusivists, while the liberals advocate an inclusive attitude. The position of the contributors to this volume is neither of these; rather, it deals with the logical conclusion of what the liberals started. It is the pluralists' position. This new position is what distinguishes the volume from others that deal with the same issue. In short, the contributors are a group of Christian thinkers who are advocating religious pluralism. The pluralist position is "a move away from insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity toward a recognition of the independent validity of other ways." This can be compared to the exclusivist position that allows salvation only in Christ and none else, and the inclusivist position, which recognises the 'salvific richness' of other religions, but holds that, it is in Christ that the richness is perfected.

The pluralist position is a radical shift indeed, and this, the contributors are aware of. Thus, the many metaphorical phrases by which the shift is portrayed: "a paradigm shift," "a monstrous shift", "the crossing of a theological Rubicon." A paradigm shift is defined as "a turn that is both genuinely different from, yet dependent upon, what went before." It was Langdon Gilkey, a contributor, who describes the shifting in his contribution as "a monstrous shift indeed ... a position quite new to the Churches, even to the liberal Churches." (Gilkey, 1992: 40)

The editors and even the contributors were therefore aware that what they were proposing would likely meet with negative responses from the Christian world. Thus, the purpose of the volume "is to 'expose' this new approach, to bring it out into the open so that other theologians, together with the Christian community at large, might better evaluate its content and coherence and judge how adequate it is to human experience, how appropriate and faithful to Christian tradition." (Knitter, 1992: viii) The editors make sure that the contributors are pluralists, and from every significant part of the Christian Churches: Protestant and Catholic, female and male, east and west, first and third World.

In formulating their views on religious pluralism, the contributors were given four questions:

1. Why do they think the modern situation is pushing Christians toward pluralistic approach to other religions?
2. How would such an approach be elaborated?
3. Is this approach (pluralism) in line with the past tradition of Christianity and the modern Christian experience?
4. What could be the implications of this approach for Christian doctrine and practice? (Knitter, 1992: viii)

The answering of these four questions, with a foregone avowal of a pluralist approach, results in exposition of the necessity for religious pluralism in contemporary times and three varieties of religious pluralism. The editors, using the imagery of “Rubicon” refer to these as three “bridges” through which the shores of exclusivism and inclusivism were crossed to pluralism. They are: first, “the historico-cultural bridge: Relativity”; second, “the theologico-mystical Bridge: mystery” and third, “the ethico-practical bridge: justice”.

The first, “The Historico-Cultural Bridge: Relativity” was represented by Gordon Kaufmann Kauffman, (1992: 3-15), John Hick (Hick, 1992: 16-36), and Langdon Gilkey (Gilkey, 1992: 37-50). The three scholars observe that modern historical consciousness renders any absolute claim, whether exclusively or inclusively meaningless and dangerous: “... the ever more impelling awareness of the historico-cultural limitation of all knowledge and religious beliefs, and the difficulty, if not impossibility of judging the truth claims of another culture or religion on the basis of one’s own.” (Knitter, 1992: ix)

The second, “Theologico-Mystical Bridge: Mystery” is represented by Wilfred Cantwell Smith (Smith, 1992: 53-68), Stanley J. Samartha (Samartha, 1992: 69-88), Raimundo Pannikar (Panikkar, 1992: 89-116) and Seiichi Yagi (Yagi 1992: 117-134). For these scholars, it is the nature of Ultimate Reality itself, which necessitates a pluralistic approach: “... the object or content of authentic religious experience is infinite – mystery beyond all forms, exceeding our every grasp of it.” This means that no one way can exhaust the infinite mystery of the Ultimate Reality. In fact, the combination of all the ways to it cannot exhaust it. Why excluding some ways then? “The infinity and ineffability of God demands religious pluralism and forbids anyone religion from having the ‘only’ or ‘final’ word.” (Knitter, 1992: x) As will be seen in the next chapter, Hick’s concept of religious pluralism belongs to this ‘bridge’.

The third, “The Ethico-Practical Bridge: Justice” is represented by Rosemary Radford Ruether, (Ruether, 1992: 134-148) Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, (Suchocki, 1992: 149-161) Aloysius Pieris, S.J., (Pieris, 1992: 162-177) and Paul Knitter (Knitter, 1992: 178-214) in their presentations. To these scholars, the extent and depth of human suffering in the modern world are what necessitate a corporate effort of the religions. The resources of the religions should be brought together to reduce wars, injustices, and other natural calamities that are common. In the words of Paul Knitter, “Economic, political and especially nuclear liberation is too big a job for any one nation, or culture, or religion ... A worldwide liberation movement needs worldwide inter-religious dialogue.” (Knitter, 1992: 190) In short, through historical consciousness, religious pluralism is reached and necessitated. The nature of Ultimate Reality itself demands it; and the suffering of humanity, demands the cooperation of all the religion, excluding none.

The central basis of religious pluralism is this last observation. Tom Driver points this out in his Postscript to the book. He writes, “... the case of pluralism is at bottom a moral or ethical one, not the result of any salvific, revelational, or rational harmony.” (Driver, 1992: 216)

John B. Cobb, Jr who was a participant in the conference, but not a contributor makes an interesting observation, which again helps distinguish pluralism from relativism. According to Knitter, (Knitter, 1992: 184) Cobb chides Hick, Cantwell Smith and Knitter himself for searching for a basis on which the unity of religions can be based. However, that appears contradictory to Cobb, for if there is a basis, it means the religions are no more plural but singular.

Cobb's objection to the type of religious pluralism developed by the contributors to the above volume led to another conference on religious pluralism organised by the Center for Process Studies in March 2003 in Claremont California. The resulting volume from the Conference was edited by David Ray Griffin and titled *Deep Religious Pluralism*. (Griffin, 2005). Unlike the 1986 Conference, which resulted in Hick and Knitter's edited volume, various religions were represented in the 2003 Conference and the resulting volume, including Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Chinese religions.

Instead of identifying an identical basis for all religions,, the thesis of the *Deep Religious Pluralism* is that each of the religions must be unique in its own way and oriented to different ultimate realities. Hick and his colleagues' proposals were identified as 'Identist', while the new one being proposed is called 'differential', 'complementary' or 'deep' pluralism.

Identist pluralists, such as John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Paul Knitter see different religions as identical, though with different conceptions and interpretations. Differential/complementary pluralists (such as John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin) recognise that the Ultimate Realities perceived by the religions may be different and each of the Realities may be unique. At first hand, the conceptions of the Realities may even be contradictory, but "A clash of doctrine is not a disaster – it is an opportunity" (Whitehead 1964: 266). The apparent contradictions could become complementary. Therefore, 'differential' pluralists are "pluralistic soteriologically and perhaps also ontologically". (Griffin, 2005: 24).

Another interesting collection of works on religious pluralism which was earlier than the two reviewed above is that edited by Edward Jürji, *Religious Pluralism and World Community*. (Jurji, 1969). The title was the theme of the second Calla hue conference, organised by Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey, held from May 4 – 11, 1966. Although a group of scholars (14 in number) contributed papers in this volume, it is hard to say that each of these represents a variety of pluralism. In the volume under consideration, like *Deep Religious Pluralism*, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jew and Christian scholars were represented, with each presenting his religion's idea of pluralism. This does not in any way mean that all the scholars were pluralists. By no means, for at least, the Muslim scholar present, A.H. Abdel Kader, an al-Azhar theologian, reiterates an Islamic exclusivist position. Another interesting thing about the event that led to this book is that the Conference, in which the papers collected in this book were delivered, was organised by a Seminary. Princeton Seminary was originally an evangelical Seminary. However, by this time, it had turned liberal. The general theme of the conference is the title of this book: "Religious Pluralism and World Community."

Houston Smith of Massachusetts Institute of Technology at Boston, in the United States, delivered the keynote address. According to Gavin D'Costa, Smith and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, were those advocating for a form of esoteric pluralism, that is, the proposition of a mystical non-dual philosophy of unity as the basis of all religions. (D'Costa, 1996: 232) This esoteric pluralism does not appear in his address in this book.

The keynote address identified the problem of religious pluralism and that of world community. As regard religious pluralism, the problem is posed in the form of question. For instance, he asks whether religions can help resolve political conflicts endangering us. "Can religion in our time be a force for the taming of nations? Does it have an irenic potential?" (Smith, 1969: 20) The answer of course, is in the affirmative. To show that religion has always been mixed up with politics to cause conflicts and to identify the problem further, he asks other questions: "Would Pakistan be partitioned from India today if Hinduism and Islam were not disparate? Would there be 600,000 refugees in Jordan (1,300,000 in Arab states as a whole), if Judaism were not a historic community distinct from Islam?" (Smith, 1969: 22) In sum, his observation is that "religious differences historically have exacerbated political divisions more than they have tempered them." (Jurji, 1969: 2).

The irenic potentiality of religion is what will develop the world into a community. Smith follows the interpretation of Marx by R.C. Zaehner who was also present at this conference. In the words of

Edward Jürji, “Zaehner saw Marxism as an eruption in our day of an age-old essentially religious dream of human solidarity.” (Jurji, 1969: 3) The irenic potential in religion could bring this dream of human solidarity into reality in the modern world. Other contributions are from various religious perspectives. We think, however, that Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s judgement of the conference is decisive – that the conference failed to tackle deep-seated differences. This, he said at the floor of the conference, although he did not present any paper.

Lastly, we want to note that a Government representative in the conference put on record the importance of religious pluralism. Fazlur Rahman was the official representative of the Pakistan Government. He writes: “The question of religious pluralism in a world community is a complementary counterpart of national pluralism in a world community.” (Quoted in Jurji, 1969: 12) This is a confession that religious pluralism is as important as national pluralism (if not more important).

4.0 Conclusion: Responses to religious pluralism

Religious pluralism is a burning issue in contemporary discussions. It has its origin in contemporary times in political liberalism. Moreover, globalisation has turned many societies to pluralistic societies. In addition, in many conflicts around the world, religion has become a major factor. But religions had been involved in fostering peace in many conflict-ridden areas, such as the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland and the resolution of Mozambique’s civil war. (Banchoff, 2005: 4).

However, religious pluralism is not a monolithic theory; there are diverse, even contradictory proposals on the nature, necessity and validity of religious pluralism. The different disciplinary contexts and religions from which religious pluralism is discussed account for the varieties. The two disciplines in which religious pluralism are discussed are: social sciences (Sociology and political science) and Religious Studies/Theology. In this paper the latter had been the focus, although the former was also treated. Some of the varieties examined include philosophical pluralism, practical or pragmatic pluralism, perennial philosophy or esoteric pluralism, the mystical unity of religions and tolerant pluralism. From the social scientific point of view, the types of religious pluralism that is obtainable in some societies are examined.

Religious pluralism provokes responses, especially negative ones, from variety of quarters. There are the Christian scholars especially, who feel that, pluralism would spell the death of Christianity. Religious pluralism is seen as a betrayal, a denial of the deity of Christ. There are also those Christian scholars like John B. Cobb Jr. who think that some versions of religious pluralism, such as that of Hick’s has an internal logical contradiction, which renders it meaningless. In addition, there are agnostics and atheists who feel that religious pluralism is an incoherent view.

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