JOHN HICKS RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

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Abstract
This paper is on the riches of John Hick's religious pluralism and the promises it holds for religious tolerance in the world today. Hick's religious pluralism, simply put, holds that every religion is a way and no religion is the way and that way removes every sense of religious supremacy among the different religions. The objective of the paper is to showcase the tenets of Hick's religious pluralism and its implication for the much sought after religious tolerance. The method used is comparative analysis of the tenets of pluralism and that of religious exclusivism, inclusivism and relativism which projects the accommodating ideals of Hick's pluralism. The paper identifies the major and universal principles where the major religions can show some tolerance as conditions for peace and brotherhood.

Key Words  Religion, Pluralism, Tolerance, Brotherhood

Introduction
That the world today is experiencing a lot of conflicts traceable to religious disharmony is obvious. The Boko Haram, insurgency, ISIS are living cases in point. From North Africa down to the south, across America and many other continents in the world, humanity is in a religious theatre of war. Besides there is a perceiveable cold war of intolerance and mutual suspicion going on among the major religions on the basis religious diversity. Scholars distinguish at least seven aspects of religious diversity: the doctrinal and the philosophical, the mythic and the narrative, the ethical and the legal, the ritual and the practical, the experiential and emotional, the social and the organizational and the materialistic and the artistic all of which are clearly diverse in the different religions in the world. According to Ninian Smart in Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World Beliefs, religious traditions differ along all these dimensions which are the undisputed facts of religious diversity.

The usual bone of contention is to have a common answer or answers to the perennial questions that trail religious diversity some of which are: are all religions true and proper access to God/Ulimate Reality or is there one religion that is true at the exclusion of others? Does God equally hear the prayers made by Christians, Muslims and Buddhists? Are there many paths or just one path to salvation/liberation? Is there any warrant for affirming the salvific validity of all religions? From the Christian perspective, is a broad-based embrace of religious pluralism and the Christian doctrine of salvation possible as Keith E. Johnson believed.1 Most religious intolerance and conflicts are hinged on the lack of satisfactory answers to these questions or puzzles and until they are satisfactorily resolved, full religious tolerance may not be achieved. These diversities in the world's religious beliefs make it difficult for religions to achieve religious harmony, peace and tolerance.

Against the backdrop of intolerance, lack of harmony, it becomes imperative to explore the possibility of unity in diversity by playing up the unifying factors, pointing out how bridges of peace could be built amidst religious differences. This is what this paper does in the light of John Hick's Religious Pluralism. Hick, in his pluralism, plays down on religious doctrines in favour of religious experience as the epicentre of religions. To situate the gains of Hick's pluralism, it will be helpful to proceed by exposing the anti religious tolerance elements or weaknesses in other responses to religious diversity namely religious exclusivism, religious inclusivism and religious relativism.

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Problems with Religious Relativism, Inclusivism and Exclusivism in Achieving Religious Harmony

Religious relativism is the belief that no religious truth, opinion or view is always generally true or valid. Religious truth is always relative, from a perspective, not the whole truth. Religious relativism thus remains committed to the truth of one set of religious teachings yet at the same time remains open to the central concerns of other religion. According to Joseph Runzo, the major proponent of religious relativism, the correctness of a religion is relative to, that is it depends on the worldview of its community of adherents. On this view, each of the religious traditions are comprised of various experiences and mutually incompatible truth claims, and the traditions are themselves rooted in distinct worldviews that are incompatible with, if not contradictory to, the other worldviews. Runzo maintains that these differing experiences and traditions emerge from the plurality of phenomenal realities experienced by the adherents of the traditions. On this relativistic view, one's worldview—that is, one's total cognitive web of interrelated concepts and beliefs—determines how one comprehends and experiences Ultimate Reality. Furthermore, there are incompatible yet adequate truth claims that correspond to the various worldviews, and the veracity of a religion is determined by its adequacy to appropriately correspond to the worldview within which it is subsumed. An important difference between the religious relativist and the pluralist is that, for the relativist and not the pluralist, truth itself is understood to be relative. Even though relativism appears to have an open door for other religious afflictions, it leaves in its trails mutual religious suspicion.

Religious inclusivism, on the other hand according to Karl Rahner, its major proponent holds the position that Christianity is the true religion which portrays God's grace as coming in his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. But it also holds that other lawful religions that admittedly embody an imperfect knowledge of God and yet contain some supernatural elements of grace are also means of salvation for many righteous but non-Christian persons who practice those religions. Rahner considers that these other religions, too, can be lawful because God, desiring that all be saved, gives people his grace through these religions. Adherents of these religions must be regarded as “anonymous Christians” until the Gospel brings them to an explicit knowledge of God's self-revelation in Jesus. However, the problem with religious inclusivism is that while it appears accommodative, it still plays the supremacy game, where one religion is still treated as superior to others but only accommodating them.

In contrast to religious relativism is religious exclusivism (of which Alvin Plantinga is one prominent example) which holds that the central tenets of one religion are true, and claims which are incompatible with those tenets are false. It holds that salvation is found exclusively in one religion. For a Muslim exclusivist, for example Allah is the one true God who literally spoke to the prophet Muhammad in space and time. Since that is true, then the Advaita Vedanta claim that Brahman (God) is nirguna—without attributes—must be false, for these two understandings of Ultimate Reality contradict one another. The same is the case for all religious exclusivists; since they take their religious claims to be objectively true, the contrary claims of other religions are false. This does not mean that exclusivists are not self-critical of their own beliefs, nor does it rule out the practice of dialoguing with or learning from other religions. But it does mean that religious differences are real and that there are intractable disagreements among religious traditions. Religious exclusivism has been the most widely held position among the adherents of the major world religions and is at the root of most religious intolerance cum conflicts. In the Bible we find many exclusivist statements like “there is no other name given to man upon which salvation may be found except the name of Jesus. (Acts 4:12). “I am the way the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Again, we see Paul declaring that the gospel of Christ “is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.” Christianity generally teaches that it is not possible to be saved apart from believing the gospel, that other religions are not saving structures. While Christianity teaches
that God demands righteousness from his creatures whom he wisely allowed to fall into sin in accordance with his eternal redemptive plan, that kind of theology has no familiar ring to the ear of a Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. Islam's God is far different from the Christian's. No Trinity exists, and God's gracious redemptive provisions are overshadowed by Allah's power, justice and inscrutable determinism. Exclusivism is the most arrogant in the pack of three with division, intolerance and conflict as its stock in trade

Religious Pluralism
Against the positions of exclusivism, relativism and inclusivism which hang on the conflicting religious doctrines, religious pluralism holds that bridges of peace could be built by focusing on religious experience of the divine which is common to all religions. Religious Pluralism holds that the great religious traditions are equally authentic responses to Ultimate Reality thus emphasis on the diverse nature doctrines of the many religions in the world will continue to impair mutual interaction, relations and tolerance in the search for the Ultimate. Religious pluralism denies or minimizes doctrinal conflicts and maintains that doctrine itself is not as important for religion as religious experience. According to Muhammad Legenhausen in Plurality of Religious Pluralism, “religious pluralism is almost always used for a theory asserting positive value for many or most religions.”

Its most ardent defender has been John Hick who utilized Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) distinctions of noumena (things as they are in themselves) and phenomena (things as they are experienced) to argue that a person’s experiences, religious and non-religious, depend on the interpretive frameworks and concepts through which one’s mind structures and comprehends them. While some people experience and comprehend Ultimate Reality in personal, theistic categories as Allah or Yahweh in Islam or Judaism respectively. Others do so in impersonal, pantheistic ways (as nirguna Brahman, for example). Yet others experience and comprehend Ultimate Reality as non-personal and non-pantheistic (as Nirvana or the Tao). We do not know which view is ultimately correct (if any of them is, and for Hick Ultimate Reality is far beyond human conceptions) since we do not have a “God's eye” perspective by which to make such an assessment.

One common illustration of the pluralist position of experiencing God is the Hindu parable of the blind men and the elephant. In this parable, God is like an elephant surrounded by several blind men. One man felt the elephant's tail and believed it to be a rope. Another felt his trunk and believed it to be a snake. Another felt his leg and believed it to be a tree. Yet another felt his side and believed it to be a wall. Each of them experience the same elephant but in very different ways from the others. In our phenomena-limited epistemic experiences and understandings of Ultimate Reality, we are very much like the blind men, for our beliefs and viewpoints are constricted by our enculturated concepts. In the Problems of Religious Pluralism, Hick explains further that:

Pluralism is the view that transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place in different ways within the contexts of all the great religious. There is not merely one way but a plurality of divine revelations, making possible a plurality of forms of saving human response.

Hick argues for what he calls the “pluralistic hypothesis”: that Ultimate Reality is ineffable and beyond our understanding but that its presence can be experienced through various spiritual practices and linguistic systems offered within the religions. The great world religions, then, constitute very different but equally valid ways of conceiving, experiencing, and responding to Ultimate Reality. He uses different analogies to describe his hypothesis, including an ambiguous picture of a duck-rabbit. A culture that has ducks but no familiarity with rabbits would see the ambiguous diagram as a duck. People in this culture would not even be aware of the ambiguity. So too with the culture that has rabbits but no familiarity with ducks. People in this culture would see the diagram as a rabbit. Hick's point is that the ineffable is
experienced in the different traditions as Vishnu, or as Allah, or as Yahweh, or as the Tao, and so on, depending on one’s individual and cultural concepts.

**Religious Pluralism in the Service of Religious Harmony**

The position here is that among the four major responses to religious diversity, religious pluralism holds the greatest peace-promise to mankind especially in Nigeria where bitter religious perceptions have done more harm than good. To harness the gains of religious pluralism, the first thing is to recognize theological *loci* that will enable different religions to come to the table of dialogue. The starting point is that every religion must acknowledge that dialogue is possible and can be fruitful as well. The moral duty of every religious person is to avoid arrogance, dishonesty and oppression of the other religion. It is also an intellectual and epistemic duty to avoid unjustified or irrational beliefs when coming to the table of dialogue. What should be important in search of religious harmony, as John Hick pointed out in *More than One Way* and *God and the Universe of Faiths* is to find connections in the universal principles that religions practice.

Again major religions must be regarded at least on face value as genuine expression of the divine. Paul Tillich and Karl Barth in D.R. Mason's *Christianity and World Religions*, provide insights and analysis that enables Christians to regard major world religions as genuine expressions of divine – human encounter and legitimate structures of salvation. While both theologians agree that Christ is the redeemer; that all human beings are redeemed with Jesus as the decisive light, yet they also recognize God's redemptive love in different contexts. Barth as also cited by Mason acknowledges that the Christian connection to salvation is with the name Jesus Christ, and that Christianity is only the historical manifestation of that name and the means whereby that name can be proclaimed to the world of religions and the world at large. They also argue that the point of the name Jesus Christ is not to promote one historical religion at the expense of others but rather to promote the fact of God, not in itself but of God – for – us … despite our attempts to elude God or to assert ourselves, in other words to build our pitiable tower of Babel. This means that instead of emphasizing the name Jesus (Christianity) or Mohammed (Islam), the emphasis should be on God for this is the unifying connection for all of them. Hick proposed an alternative to Christ centered concept of religion with a more God centred one in the same design as the solar system.

Secondly, since it is clear, as religious pluralism holds, that each of the religions is capturing only an *aspect* of the transcendent, it seems that religious humility in search of peace should acknowledge that one would obtain a better understanding of its essence by creating a new syncretistic religion in order to glean a more comprehensive understanding of Ultimate Reality. In *The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian*, Paul Tillich calls for the inter-penetration of systematic theological study and religious embodiments of the ultimate or the Holy but that no actual religion, not even Christianity, as a religion can be identified as a final expression of the inner *telos* of all religions. Also, since religious adherents are only glimpsing the transcendent through properties which are themselves acculturated within the various traditions, no true theology will deny that their descriptions of Ultimate Reality cannot offer adequate *knowledge* claims about it. For Plotinus, the great early mediaeval philosopher, nothing specifically descriptive can be said about the true changeless reality called God. He absolutely transcends or lies beyond everything in the world. Hence God is said to be ineffable. He cannot be confined to any idea or ideas of the intellect and for this reason God cannot be expressed in any human language. He is accessible to none of the senses and can be reached in a mystical ecstasy that is independent of any rational or sense experience. That is why all theologies are at least mitigated forms of religious skepticism. Peter Bynre supports this when he argues that each of the different major religious traditions reflects only some aspects of the transcendent.
Byrne like Hick, uses the notion of natural kinds in order to clarify his view. Just as the natural kind gold has an unobservable essence as well as observable properties or qualities—being yellow, lustrous, and hard—so too Ultimate Reality has an essence with different experienced manifestations. Ultimate Reality manifests different aspects of itself in the different religions given their own unique conceptual schemes and practices. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, insists that the various religions are necessarily shaped by their distinctive historical cultural contexts and that each one can hold an authentic but nonetheless, imperfect conception of God or ultimate reality.

Furthermore, while each religion should hold onto the skeletal framework of her beliefs, the institutional skin which divides it from other religions should be removed. There is nothing wrong with the views of inclusivists, like Karl Rahner, that the ‘absolute’ provision for salvation is revealed in one religion, but there is everything wrong in rejecting the fact that God might reveal himself or act graciously in various ways in a variety of places and times; hence people can encounter God and receive God’s grace in diverse religions. That is, adherents of other religions can be saved/liberated because of persons of events specified by the true religion, without knowing about the religion that embodies the objective provision for salvation. Christian Platonists like Augustine believed that truths are written in the human heart. In The Stromata, Clement of Alexandria makes an impassioned argument for Christians to respect the treasures of other traditions. Quoting Psalm 2 ‘The Lord is on many waters’ Clement speculates that this includes the waters of Greek philosophy and not just those of the biblical traditions. Arguing this point, he states that all truth is one and all wisdom is from the Lord. If we find words of Wisdom in Plato, then this is from God no less than the words of the prophets. Hence, fragments of God’s eternal truth have found their way into pagan philosophy. Clement is saying in so many words, that it is foolish for Christians to reinvent the wheel. If Plato has good arguments for the immortality of the soul, then we can use his work and don’t need to duplicate his efforts. Clement sees philosophy as a gift of divine providence and compares Old Testament law with philosophy. 6

Again, the insight of W. Smith as to the nomenclatural origin of the religious intolerance cum conflict is important. In the Meaning and End of Religion, Smith traces the development of the concept of religion showing that the word ‘religion’ is rather a recent Western word used to describe with considerable abstractions, traditions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and the rest of others, as mutually exclusive systems of belief. 7 This has proved very costly since it succeeded in depicting these religions as standing over and against one another, and as conflicting ideological or doctrinal claims to truth. In Smith’s estimation, this has had the ruinous effect of stopping inter faith dialogue in its tracks. What we call religions is what Smith calls cumulative traditions. Like cultures, these cumulative traditions are vast, complex, protean, multiformal and ever developing and changing process. Such entities as Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity are not single, static reified religions for they take on quite diverse forms, concepts, expressions in geographical places and in different historical periods. With regard to the question of their truth, Smith would say that it is as odd to speak of these cumulative traditions as true or false as it would be to speak of a great civilization. Smith finds what he calls “faith” as what distinguishes these spiritual traditions (their heart and Soul). For Smith, faith is a crucial concept, the common features of all religions and integrally related to his understanding of truth. The distinctive quality of this faith is seen in the uniquely human need to apprehend and know in a personally committed way. To Smith, faith is universally same in this phenomenological sense, religions or cultural cumulative traditions are multiformal and varied as religious beliefs. Such beliefs, while necessary are nonetheless a second-order dimension of faith. When belief are thought to be primary, they give rise to differences, misunderstandings, suspicions and conflicts that characterize our religious life in the present day. As Smith writes:

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A devout person whose sense of the presence of God is both vivid and sincere may plead for God’s mercy and humbly know the quiet transport of its assurance because of his personal and living faith that God is indeed merciful. At that moment, the truth of that man’s religiousness is perhaps a different matter from the question of the earthly path by which he arrived at his awareness of his faith or of the community of which he is a member.⁸

For Smith religious truth has more to do with interiorizing and living out a form of life: the Muslim’s personal interiorizing of the teachings of the Quran or the Buddhist’s personal, sincere appropriation of the Buddha’s Dharma. Their truth is confirmed in the liberating of saving efficacy of this act of truth. Smith contends that it is wrong to ask whether various multiform, cumulative traditions are true. Truth does not reside in religions but in persons in the faithfulness and integrity of persons. The true religion person does not reside in any one religious person or group, say Christianity or Islam. True religious people are all those who ‘do the will of the father’ no matter the religion they belong. They are those whose religious belief has enabled to overcome capital human vices like greed, selfishness, materialism etc. Ghandi though a Hindu is as good a saint like the adorable Mother Theresa of Calcutta a Christian nun, just like Nelson Mandela a traditionalist. These are shining souls for the whole of humanity despite their religious inclination. Instead of testing the validity of a true religion on the basis its name, it is better to test it on the basis of its impact on its adherents especially its production of men that demonstrate divine characters in their lives. Such characters include peace, altruism, selflessness and the list continues. Any one who manifests such divine characters, no matter the religion they belong is in the true religion. Good non-pious westerners who are very selfless are better than pious Africans who are greedy. The selfless Madela, a traditionalist is better than Paul Biya of Rome who has held onto power, as at 2018, for as long as 36 yrs and refused to open up the political space of Cameroon, almost plunging the country into civil war. This may mean that the true religion may not have a nomenclature. According to Smith, It is dangerous and impious to suppose that Christianity or Buddhism or Islam et c. is true, as something “out there” impersonally subsisting. Christianity is not true absolutely, impersonally statically, rather it can become true, if and as you or I appropriate it to ourselves and interiorize it, in so far as we live it out from day to day.⁶

Smith considers it quite wrong to think of the world religions in terms of their competing “truth-claims.” These cumulative traditions should be viewed as divergent paths. They are ways, proven means that are necessarily different. All human religious constructs, be they words or rituals, doctrines or images are necessary means to direct individuals towards the transcendent.⁹ Any religious person in one way or the other has a belief in the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” True religion rejects all forms of division, hatred and intolerance, and respects the value and religious traditions of humanity. An examination of the representations of the Golden Rule in the heart of the world’s major religions as Francis Arinze articulated shows the elements of the Golden rule in different religions. He observed that The love of our neighbor which Christianity professes as the golden rule of moral conduct (Cf. Mt. 7:12 “Always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets) is also part of the doctrinal patrimony of other great world religions as shown below in the maxims of six of them:

**Hinduism**: this is the sum of duty: Do not do to others what would cause you pain if done to you --Mahabharata 5.15.17

**Buddhism**: Hurt not others in ways that you would find hurtful. -Udanavarge 5:18

**Confucianism**: It is the maxim of loving kindness.(jin): Do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you Analects (Rongo) 15:23
Judiasm: what is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. That is the entire law; all the rest is commentary -Talmud, Shabbat 31a
Islam: “No one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother that which he loves for himself -the Forty Two Traditions of An-Nawawi
African Traditional Religion: What you give (or do) to others, these will give (or do) to you in return - Rwandan Proverb

The journey of religious tolerance and harmony can begin when each religious adherent begins to understand and see these unifying or common grounds in the different religions. Those who embrace a particular position must be enlightened about positions other than their own. In Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism, Peter Byrne holds that religious pluralism enables all faiths to be vehicles for salvation or liberation. It ascribes cognitive success to many religious traditions whereby the detailed dogmatism of every faith is suspended and confessionalisms distinguished. Similarly, Kosoke Koyama in “A Theological Reflection of Religious Pluralism” affirms that religious pluralism encourages us not to relativize truth, even though different responses to truth which are conditioned by history and culture can be relativized.1 It helps us to reject the claim of any particular response to be absolute. The acknowledgement that no one can hold the truth in the palm of his or her hand is the basic orientation of religious pluralism. The criterion of truth must be the principle of universality not according to any religious orientation.

This is well articulated in Richard Wentz historical examination of the challenges that pluralism presents to denominationalism and civil religion. He considers the contributions which secularism and the new age movement have made to the culture of religious pluralism and maintains that healthy religious pluralism must be based on civility and respect of religious traditions and an extension of ourselves into the traditions of others. When we leave the names attached to cumulative traditions as Smith would call them and concentrate on what all the world religions share in common namely religious experience; people are religious because they experience the divine, then the project of true religion will therefore be to bring the diverse convictions into a coherent whole for no religion has a superior truth claim. Hick, as explained above, demonstrated that there is no superior moral or salvific ground that establishes one religion over another. Since no religion is able to rationally prove its claims about God and all religions resort to experience as its major ground for belief, then all religions must be treated with respect and taken seriously. This similarity between religions according to Hick challenges traditional Christian claims because if Christianity genuinely was the correct religion, then it should produce better people. He writes

If we take literally the traditional belief that in Christ we have an uniquely full revelation of God and a uniquely direct relationship with God…. Then surely, this ought to produce some noticeable difference in our lives. Christians ought to be better human beings than those who lack these inestimable spiritual benefits… so we are stock on the horn of dilemma. We either have to claim against the evidence of our experience, that as members of the body of Christ, Christians in general are better human beings than nonChristians, or are we going to have to rethink those of our traditional doctrines that entail that.12

Conclusion
All those factors that hinder the realization of religious brotherhood discourage the promotion and construction of peace are in themselves enemies of true religion. Such statements as extra ecclesias nulla salus (outside the church, there is no salvation) is not only anachronistic and arrogant but must be jettisoned for peace to reign. The desire to solve our religious indifferences through intolerance is quite an illusion, an eternal one for that matter because that day may never come when everybody will have one religion, will understand God the same way, will have one world view. Religious intolerance is a lie, for it goes against the truth
of the basic nature of human culture: that we are diverse. That is why religious intolerance destroys what destroys what it claims to build namely the dignity of human cultural diversity, thus aggravating tension, creates fresh ones. To wrap up we turn attention to the great apostle of religious peace, John Paul II, who spent his whole life preaching that religion should be at the service of peace. John Paul II took time and energy explaining and exposing the indispensable role of religion in the mission of peace. He advocated that religious emphasis should be on those superior values which arise from the dignity of the human person, a subject created in the image of God. Religion and peace go together such that it is a contradiction to wage war in the name of God. True to its nature, he argues religion is opposed to exclusion, discrimination, hatred, rivalry, isolation and division and can never become a pretext for conflict nor an excuse for violence, even when religious identity coincides with cultural and ethnic identity.13

John Paul II strongly believes that despite the phenomenon of its varied beliefs, religious pluralism does not establish religion as violent but demands among world religions the renunciation of any form of violence and the committed match on the path of reconciliation and collaboration in order to render a hopeful service to the one family created by God. According to him since in the different religions is found the longing for peace which is deeply rooted in human nature, “it is the duty of religions, and of their leaders above all, to foster in the people of our time a renewed sense of the urgency of building peace. Each religion must imbibe the spirit of order and tranquility, solidarity and sharing, cooperation and mutual respect, as these are the ways in which the yearning for peace is expressed. Each must also concentrate on what is proper to it: attention to God, the fostering of universal brotherhood and spreading of a culture of human solidarity, so as to effectively perform its vital role of fostering gestures of peace and in consolidating conditions of peace.”14 It is the position of this paper that every religion is a way and no religion is the way. This is because all religions virtually teach the same thing under different labels. The message of all religions is man’s attempt to relate with the divine in the face of mystery. Religions should therefore seek the way of peace, serenity, balance, self control and understanding, forgiveness and generosity which exercise much peace influence among people. In a world marked by religious strife and conflict, peace cannot be obtained unless the tenets of religious pluralism are imbibed.

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