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The Perennialism Approach toward the Unity of Religions

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Abstract

The formation of a sound interreligious dialogue concept is essential if different religious believers are to coexist peacefully. Many well-known religious experts have been working very hard to establish a foundation for interreligious discussion. Some of them have made an effort to conceptualize the notions of religious unity, in which all the many religions in this multireligious world could find common ground. Let's start by looking at how people now interact with religion. People who argue that all religions' teachings are relative reject the idea that every one of them conveys the absolute truth. This is one of several kinds of human attitudes toward religion. They can be categorized as "relativists." People who reject all other religions and only accept their own as absolute are in the second group. This concept might be referred to as "exclusivism." People who look for a means to accept all religions as true fall into the third type. "Universalism" is the concept in question. We now have a better understanding of how people respond to the diversity of religions in "a highly globalized world," but we must ask again: how did people learn to adopt these mindsets?

Keywords: *perennialism, interreligious dialogue, religious multiplicity*

Introduction

In this "an already (highly) globalized world," one often ponders over the central question of one's own spirituality and religious belief, while at the same time, has very frequent and intense contacts with others whose beliefs and values may contradict to one's own. This ever-increasing possibility in encountering diversity—in the contradictions of religious dogmas and practices per se—makes this "globalized world" more vulnerable and chaotic than ever before. A proper concept for inter-religious dialogue is, therefore, highly needed to form as the basis for diverse religious believers to live in harmony with each other. Many prominent scholars of religion have

been struggling a lot to provide a basis for inter-religious dialogue. Some of them have tried to approach this problem by conceptualizing the ideas of unification of religions, in which all religions in this multi-religious world could find their meeting point.

In order to form the basis for engaging in a discussion of the problems of religions in a multi-religious world, and to comprehend the need of inter-religious dialogue and to gain an insight into how scholars of religion struggle to conceptualize unification of religions, we should first analyze how religions are placed. Let us begin by analyzing how people in today's world are engaging with religion. There are multiple categories of human attitudes toward religions; the first category is ones who reject the claim of the absolute truth conveyed in every religion by arguing that the teachings of all religions are relative. We can call them as "relativists." The second category is ones who only accept one's own religion as the absolute one and reject all other religions. This idea may be called as "exclusivism." The third category is ones who try to find a way in which all religions could be considered as true. This idea belongs to "universalism". We, now, have some idea of how people react toward multiplicities of religion in "a highly globalized world," but, again, we must question how did people learn to develop those types of attitudes?

Attitudes toward the Religious Multiplicity

The fact that we have thousands of contradictions among religions, in terms of doctrine and practice, becomes the main reason behind the growing number of the relativists. Let us analyze some examples based in facts. For instance, celibacy is required for some Christian and Buddhist monasteries, yet Islam just simply allows one to marry more than one wife, even up to four. Cows are sacred for Hindus, but Muslims all over the world slaughter millions of cows during Eid al-Adha – Muslim's Feast of Sacrifice – every year. These type of facts lead groups of people to easily conclude that every truth mentioned in religion is nothing but, relative. They conclude that there is simply no such thing called as "the Absolute Truth" provided by religions. Since the Absolute Truth must be the only truth, and there must be no contradiction in Truth; therefore, the idea of the Absolute Truth just seems illogical for the relativist.

Thus, since the truth is, in this sense, no more than just a relative truth, so why do we have to keep struggling in finding the “truth” in religions? Unfortunately, such an attitude highly impoverishes, if not destroys, the religion itself. If it were the case, then what can we expect from this relativist attitude in its contribution toward inter-religious dialogue? Not much!

The groups of people who prefer to deal with the second choice—the exclusivists—may argue that it is ultimately inevitable for religious persons to believe in the Absolute Truth of their own religion, since it is the only way for legitimating their religion as “religion.” Practically speaking—if this concept is implemented—one could not choose which part of the religion they liked and combine it with other religious teachings they like, without diminishing their own religious principles from their own religious tradition. It is, in fact, not uncommon to find many people that, instead of being open-minded, have ended up by having simple faith to their own religion or becoming so critical—in the negative meaning—toward their own religion simply because they are aware of other religious traditions.

It must, of course, require an open-minded attitude for inter-religious dialogue, yet if there were no sense of religious principles represented by religious persons in that dialogue, what kinds of meaning would that dialogue hold? Where would such inter-religious dialogue lead, then would just become an inter-“social, cultural, personal, or else, you name it!”-dialogue?

Frankly speaking, there would be no meaningful inter-religious dialogue without the involvement of religious principles from all representatives of religions in the dialogue. Nevertheless, it is also obvious that the exclusivist attitude of considering one’s own religion to be true and others just simply wrong could never lead to the possibility of deep study of other religions.

The third category of people is ones whose attitude is, based on my understanding, the most useful in the making the most of inclusive inter-religious dialogue. It is inclusive in a way that there might be no inter-religious dialogue at all if the ideas of religion itself would be relativized into nothing, as there might be also no inter-religious dialogue if only one religious authority would find its most

dominant position in the dialogue. The only way is by firstly considering that every religion must be “true.” Those last group of people who are advocating that all religions could be considered as “true” have, indeed, been providing some ways of finding the concept of the unity of religions; the universalist.

Perennialism

The idea of the unity of religions and recognizing of the truth of all religions is widely sounded in the school of thought known as perennial philosophy. However, it might be noted that, even though it may be called philosophy, it is, in fact, dominantly metaphysical, rather than “philosophical” from Western perspective. The principle idea of the universality of religions which is widely sounded in the perennial philosophy can be traced back to William James (1842-1910), especially, as it is explored in one of his famous books, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). However, the exploration of the idea of the unity of religion became more metaphysical and cosmological in the hands of, at least, three most prominent figures of perennial philosophy, René Guénon (1886-1951), Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), and Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) who were considered as the founding fathers of perennial philosophy—again, in metaphysical and cosmological sense; and followed by the most recent figure, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933-now)—in which perennialism found a second birth in our time. Through this chain of knowledge comes to us the works that once again makes an affirmation of a timeless wisdom which lies at the heart of all integral religious traditions— which makes those thoughts known as “traditionalism”—and seeks to elucidate the metaphysical and cosmological principles which inform this perennial wisdom—which makes them also known as “perennialism.”

Perennial philosophy gives more emphasis to the re-establishment of the esoteric/spiritual tradition of religion as its response to the present usage— understanding and pursuit—of the world religions, which often leaves out the spiritual dimension. Nasr (2007, p. 29) strongly argues that “there is no spirituality without religion.” For Nasr, this element (spirituality) is the one that has been mostly

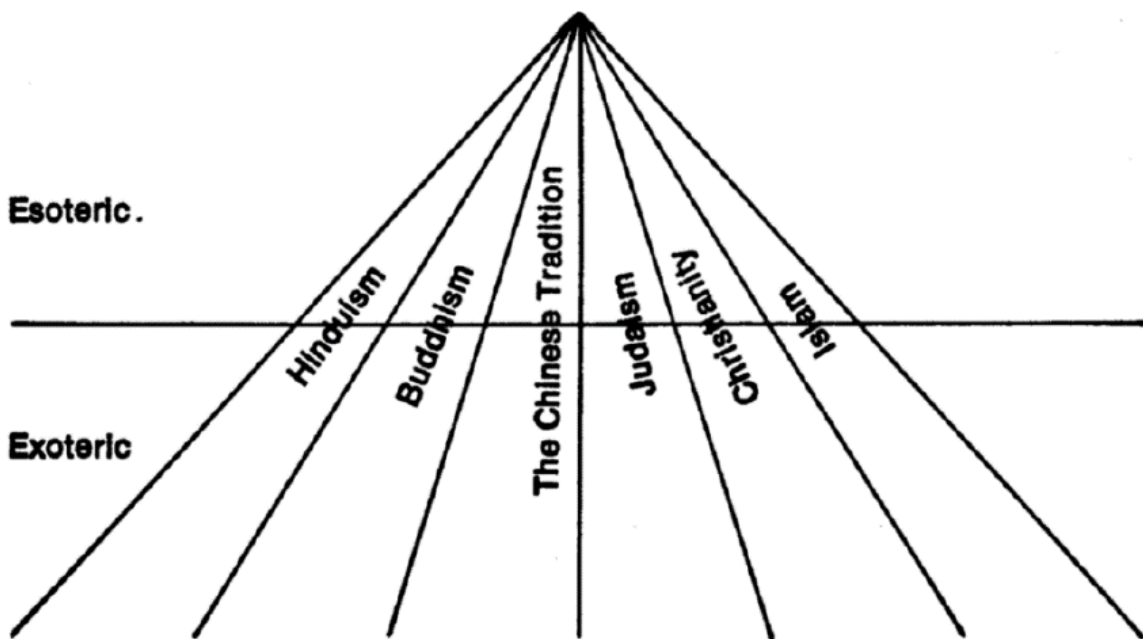
forgotten by many people in the West and has been wrongly identified as distinct from religion – as appears in the New Age movement or Spiritualism which is now growing in western societies (see Fuller, 2001 and Huss, 2014). If one were discard the principle of spirituality, religions would be merely considered in their present form as dogmatic or practical matters.

Perennial philosophy, through its attempt to re-establish the esoteric tradition, not only offers a basis for the unity of religions but also a genuinely comparative study of religions which is first, by affirming the multileveled structure of Reality and Divine Will, and second by recognizing tradition as something alive, a ceaseless and an ever-renewing vision of life. Both ideas of this multi-level structure and the unicity of religions offered by perennialism is not to solve immediate political problems of the world but to reach the “transcendental unity of religions,” in which, in this transcendental realm, the religions of the world are unified without denying their forms.

“Perennialism” resembles, to some extent, “universalism” which believes in the universal truth, but, it, uniquely, also insists on the need of “fundamentality” of every tradition without any mean to relativize it. In perennialism, the idea of fundamentalism is central in the understanding that, though “Truth” is universal, it cannot be accessed by ones who are not pledging allegiance to one tradition. Fundamentalism must be understood with that limitation, so that, even perennialism could be suspected to have some level of exclusivism, it should never mean to be the exclusivist in every extreme level it may go. The “extreme” form of religion that is mostly dogmatic or practical is, again, not the main core of perennial philosophy that emphasizes the importance of the metaphysical and cosmological principle above all else.

Claiming to be more religious, theological, and metaphysical in studying various religions, perennial philosophy stands out against the “dominant flows” of religious study. It is the philosophical standing point in which the question finding “eternal truth” finds its place. This “eternal truth” is, indeed, at par with “tradition,” since it is the main consideration of those traditionalists/perennialists themselves. A tradition is

called tradition because it is transmitted—etymologically speaking, word tradition (with small “t”) means “that which is transmitted.” However, for perennialists, “Tradition” (Tradition is sometimes written by using “T” to be distinct from tradition with “t”) is not only that it is transmitted, it is called Tradition (with capital T) because it is also “eternal, universal, and immutable.” In its primordial sense, referred to René Guénon (quoted by Perry, 1971, p. 20), “... the Tradition contained in the Sacred Books of all peoples, a Tradition which in reality is everywhere the same, in spite of all the diverse forms it assumes to adapt itself to each race and period.” Tradition, in perennialism, then, is not merely something from the past, instead, it points out to the “eternal truth,” which is “evergreen.” The unique perspective of a traditionalist, which is also commonly referred to as “Traditional worldview” is in contrast to “modern world view” – or the dominant flow. Its foundation lies in the incalculable richness of meaning—the “sacred” knowledge—that posits deep beneath the surface and at the same time beyond appearance.



Schuon's (2005) Transcendent Unity of Religions

Transcendental unity in its relation to traditions provides the “true” sense of Tradition expressed in religions or (metaphysical) philosophies in their attainment of

“sacred” knowledge. The top of this “sacred” knowledge pyramid is the most formless aspect of every religion of the world, i.e. “Primordial Tradition.” Its existence from the beginning of human history and its attainability through either historical expression of this truth in various traditions or by “intellectual” intuition or by philosophical “contemplation” is what makes this “Primordial Tradition” – a primal sense of tradition. This Primordial Tradition is fundamentally termed as Sophia Perennis of the Western Tradition, which Hindus call as Sanatāna Dharma, and the Muslims call as Al-Hikmat Al-Khaālidah.

“Tradition contains the sense of a truth which is both of divine origin and perpetuated throughout a major cycle of human history through both transmission and renewal of the message by means of revelation. It also implies inner truth which lies at the heart of different sacred forms and which is unique since Truth is one. In both senses, tradition is closely related to philosophia perennis if this term is understood as the Sophia which has always been and will always be and which is perpetuated by means of both transmissions horizontally and renewal vertically through contact with that reality that was ‘at the beginning’ and is here and now” (Nasr, 1989, p. 66).

Thus, this so-called Primordial Tradition must be positioned more exclusively from the limitations of religion which, in many cases, are limited only to its outward and material i.e. non-spiritual domains. Since Primordial Tradition lies at the top of the esoteric pyramid of religions, it must be “the most formless of the formless” which, to a large extent, has nothing to do anymore with the exoteric or outward aspects of religion. The problem of multiplicity of religions, therefore, should rely on Primordial Tradition as Sophia Perennis found in different forms which is at the heart and origin of all truth, since it is Absolute.

This transcendental unity of religion conceptualized by perennialists proposes that every religious tradition could only be united at the peak of the esoteric level of religions, or in other words, in the realm of the Primordial Tradition. Since this “universal” idea is placed beyond worldly and material affairs, the unification of religions in this “world” is practically not applicable. This concept also implies that

there is no “practical or political” idea, whatever it may be, to unify religions. It is even strongly emphasized by perennialists that every struggle toward the “worldly” ecumenical of religions would just lead to the sentimentalist approach toward the unity of religions. For instance, the “sentimentalist” approach may be derived from the sense of equality of beings – in which the view is based on the idea that all religions are the same and equal and thus what differs among them is considered as unimportant – which is seen in Madame Blavatsky’s and Annie Besant’s ideas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and later in the Ramakrishna Mission, the World Council of Faiths, and Baron von Hügel (Nasr, 2007, p. 19). This type of approach, even has influentially established friendly relation among religions, tends to be constructed in “modernist” way which sees the unity of religions without paying attention to the diverse metaphysical, theological, and social teachings which they obviously entail. In response to these ideas, Nasr (2007, p. 19) argues, “that ‘feeling’ of brotherhood is certainly not going to solve the problem of the plurality of religions, because it leaves aside the basic question of religious truth, which is related to knowledge rather than sentiment.” It explains why through the traditional studies of religions from the point of view of *Scientia sacra* – the sacred knowledge which stands at the center of the circle of tradition – the comparative study of religions could be best considered to solve the problem of plurality of religions – in which, only through this way, the Principle and manifestation, Essence and form, Substance and accident, the Inward and the outward can be distinguished. In this agenda, the unity of religions is necessary to be firstly found in the Absolute which is at once Truth and Reality as the origin of all revelations and of all truth. Nasr’s way of thinking is a confirmation of Schuon’s perspective (2005) who sees that complete harmony of religions is not intelligible in human atmosphere. These thinkers argue that it is only in Divine Reality or in the Divine Stratosphere, or in other words, only through God Himself or through Transcendent roots and the Intelligence that truth would not be fragmentary, and, thus, can be realized and explained.

Conclusion

It could be concluded that Perennialism insists that there would no sufficient basis of unification of religions from a worldly perspective, since the basis of the unity of religion is not in material external life but in the realm of spiritual of Primordial Tradition, the Sophia Perennis, which is immutable and “only expressed” through every religious tradition in the world. The meeting ground of unity, therefore, cannot be found in the measurable religious “expression,” yet in the very source of its expression that is “God” or the Primordial Tradition “Itself.” Perennialists’ quest ended up with a strong claim that it would be useless in struggling to find the worldly basis of unification of religion. Perennialists’ *Scientia Sacra* is conceptualized to show that the objective standard is only accessible “inwardly” or spiritually rather than be known “outwardly” or materially.

The problem remained is that the perennialism approach toward the esoteric unity of religions, if not understood wisely, may imply a sense of “exclusivism.” As a consequence of focusing mainly on the idea of saving “the soul,” as the first duty of man according to every religion, perennialism does not require religious persons to solve the problems arising from multiplicity of religions, since their idea of universality cannot be achieved through a worldly life. Extremism is another side of modernity coin which has not only eroded religion of its primordial basis but also resulted in its revival in a more exclusivist form. Extremism, thus, is a response towards the very attack of modernism against religious identity, which has caused many people to emphasize their identity on the basis of exclusiveness. Extremism, however dangerous it might become, is becoming inevitable in this “modern world;” thing we cannot deny anymore. Therefore, even though one is aware of the foreseeable dangers of extremism, still, perennialists never agree to the idea of proposing unity of religion in this worldly perspective. For them, those ideas, whatever they may entail, would be nothing than short of sentimentality; in which sentimental feeling alone is certainly not going to solve the problem of plurality of religions, because it leaves aside the central question of religious truth—the perennialism are looking for—which is related to “knowledge” rather than sentiment. Therefore, inter-religious dialogue is only valid if it were done in the search of “knowledge” – to be exact, the knowledge of

Absolute Truth—by all religions rather than were done as a response to interreligious dialogue that results in sentimentality. However, perennial philosophy has contributed to the way we see the importance of the knowledge of others, as through these whole fragmentary of knowledges which have been distributed to all “Traditions” in this world, this world may keep surviving. Perennial philosophy fills the gap of the question that Kung (1991, xv, cited in Brewer, 2001, 105) struggled to answer, as he says that:

“World survival depends upon a global ethic; a global ethic is not possible without religious peace, and religious peace is dependent upon inter-religious dialogue, and no dialogue between the religions without accurate knowledge of one another.”

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