

Religious Pluralism

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Abstract

In the traditional paradigm, the study of the 'other' was based on the exclusivist approach. Hence, every individual religious identity claimed exclusiveness in terms of salvation particularly, and in general, the right to live at his existence level, and the right to persist at his conceptual level. But the West witnessed an utterly different experience during and after the Renaissance, the period which was wrongly interpreted as a combat between religion and science; actually it was a combat between an interpolated sacred text and the ever increasing human perception based on the tools made by human beings after a long experiential phenomenon. Thereafter, the West enabled herself to design a diametrically opposed notion by a total rejection of 'religion as such,' and considered it as an inspirational tool in order to satisfy the inner needs and feelings of those who still found their attachment to the other world. Thereby emerges the pattern of civilizational study, and this replaced the study of religions in a very clever manner.

The study of religions helps one to know the right path and follow it, whereas the study based on civilization helps one to know different values and trends of thinking without the least idea to accept, for in this study genre, discovering the right path is not intended at all. Later on, considering the 'other' the right one along with one's own self, shaped a new discipline called pluralism, which has assumed another name - the new religion. Keeping in view the paradigm of pluralism, it is claimed by the modernist that the followers of every religion have the right of salvation but the historical analysis of religious study disapproves it. In this article, Christianity and Islamic perspective of salvation have been discussed. Further, an in-depth study of Islam reveals two dimensions in the above succinctly stated Western experience; one, the text Islam presents is not interpolated; second, historical study of Islam manifests that 'religious tolerance' has been a hallmark of every Islamic epoch, derived from its very text, and this is altogether different from that of 'religious pluralism,' an extended model of civilizational study.

Keywords: Pluralism, Christianity, Salvation, Civilization, Exclusivism, Inclusivism

Introduction

Initially, the word pluralism was defined closely to the meaning of toleration such as "the existence of a variety of different people, opinions, or principles within the same society, system, or philosophy."¹ Historically speaking, this was the need of the West, especially after the Enlightenment Period when people of the West had been scuffling with each other on philosophical grounds with reference to metaphysical doctrines. Of course, this is the question related to the changing of the worldview, which results in the changing of perspective from the basis, and for this people were not ready. After a long movement, people gathered together to accommodate the 'other.'

Again, another definition includes people of different religions who constitute the way to live together peacefully as, “the principle that people of different races, religions, and political beliefs can live together peacefully in the same society.”² This definition extends the meaning a step ahead by including particularly ‘religions’. Again, the context is the West where religious and political conflicts and contentions were on the way to distrust the mutual living of the people. New Dictionary of Ideas states, “Pluralism derives from the Latin plures, meaning “several or many” and it has formed the central concern of various intellectual traditions through the history of the West.”³

1. The Bible and Exclusivism

Though the concept of pluralism got popularity in the modern West, we observe a different approach in the Bible where an exclusivist approach has been furnished to give confidence and consolation to the followers of Christ. As stated in the Bible, “he who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life” (1 John 5:12).⁴ In an explanatory note to this verse, New Bible Commentary (21ST Century) wrote, “life and the Son go together. It is impossible to have the one without the other.”⁵ Still another verse of the Bible lays more stress that salvation in the hereafter cannot be achieved without faith on Christ. The Bible reads, “no comes to the Father, but by me.”⁶ But amazingly the above cited commentary of the Bible runs without taking account of this exclusivist based verse and similarly ‘the interpreter dictionary of the Bible’ also left the same verse unattended. The reason behind this concealing seems that the Vatican 2 Council was held in 1962 and these dictionaries were published after that.

There are some other sources which reveal vividly that the history of Christianity has a different picture with respect to salvation and exclusivism. In his book, Linwood Urban explains that in the modern period, the concept of salvation changes a lot and an attempt is made to re-examine such verses of the Bible. He writes, “At the center of this reevaluation is the claim that there is no salvation apart from faith in Jesus. Over the centuries this position was accepted without question by the majority of Christians because it seemed rooted in the New Testament and in Jesus’ concept of his ministry; but recent studies have raised doubts about the status and significance of this exclusivist doctrine.”⁷

2. A Change in Definition: Introduction of Civilizational Studies

An important point in this quotation is ‘recent studies’; what is the type of these studies that the fundamental doctrine of Christianity about salvation undergoes a drastic and profound change? This would be discussed a little later in detail but it is pertinent here to quote the reason depicted by the above mentioned author. He says, “The dramatic increase in our knowledge of other cultures over the last one hundred years has brought with it increased respect for these cultures. Furthermore, the growing economic interdependence of nations has fostered the unity of all humanity. As we in the West have developed a new regard for the great civilizations of Asia and the Near East, so also has grown our appreciation for their religious traditions-Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Similarly, increased contact with primitive cultures has revealed that they and their

religions are not nearly as primitive as our grandparents believed. As a result, Christians have begun to reexamine their attitudes towards other religions and, in particular, to consider seriously the charges that Christians missionary activity resulted in cultural and religious imperialism.”⁸ This makes the design of recent studies increasingly obvious that economic interest and civilizational approach bring this revolutionary change in the attitude of Christianity.

The purpose of this historical analysis in the evolution of Christians’ fundamental creed related to redemption and salvation is to show that all religions in the past believed that their standpoint in all matters was absolutely right, particularly in the domain of salvation which was not universal in nature and strictly observed exclusivism. However, voices began to acknowledge the ‘other’ at the end of the 19th century to accomplish the task of imperialism. Charles Gore, in his lectures delivered in 1892, speaks, “All religions contain more or less considerable elements of truth. And Christianity, I say, supersedes other religions by including the elements of truth which belong to each in a vaster and completer whole. It supersedes them as daylight superseded twilight; aye, makes the twilight by comparison to be as the night. In part it is by direct opposition to what is positively evil.”⁹

The first sentence of this framed quotation suggests that the speaker is considering the truth in other religions but the same quotation ends with this assumed fact that, without the touch of Christianity, they will remain evil. Hence, it is highly incumbent to reach out to the non-Christians. He says, “I have left myself but little time to speak of the witness which the church must bear abroad among the heathen. It is the same ‘witness but under conditions - in face of Hindu, Buddhist, Mohammedan forms of thought ... and in face of less developed forms of belief among less civilized tribes...It is the catholic mission and claim of the church that we are called upon to vindicate.”¹⁰

Inherently it is the permanent feature of every religion to extend and vindicate its values to others. Rev. Robert J. Fox gives the answer about salvation. He embarks that, “For men ‘in the whole world’ to get to heaven it can be only through Jesus Christ. They cannot be saved by a Buddha, a Confucius, or a Muhammad. There is no such thing as Christians having Jesus Christ for their savior, while those of the faith of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islamism (Muslims) or even Judaism, which does not accept Jesus Christ as the messiah, having other saviors.”¹¹ This is the official creed of the Catholics even after the Second Vatican and on the basis of this they believe “our duty is to preach and to profess Jesus Christ.”¹²

This is an evident proof that the movement of civilizational study and then pluralistic study in the West about different religions is not launched by the religious people but by those who are called modernists and secularists. And their sole purpose is to get rid of any revealed or inspirational source from the heavens. They want freedom based on humanism.

Having discussed the question of salvation and redemption from the Christian sources, the question arises then: what are the reasons that pluralism, “in the

sense of claiming that all point of view are equally valid,”¹³ is trying to make firm roots in today’s world, especially when most of the theologians feel that “pluralism has profoundly altered the classical ideal of theology which was inherited in part from scholasticism of the middle ages.”¹⁴ Theologians affirmed this doctrine so that the clash between the churches may be reduced. The Second Vatican Council’s declaration states, “Vatican 2 urged each local church to plant the seed of the faith within the rich soil of the customs, wisdom, teaching, philosophy, arts and sciences of its particular people...Differences need not diminish unity, but indeed contribute to it and make more resplendent of the catholicity of the church.”¹⁵ It means that the concept that everyone is equally valid and true is not endorsed outside the churches; rather it is a phenomenon that works within to lessen a long journey of combat amongst churches.

3. Second Vatican Council: Paradigm Shift

In the whole history of Christianity, the Second Vatican Council is of significant importance. It seems that due to the direct involvement of progressive minds, (modernist) Christianity underwent a considerable and far-reaching change. Tony Lane demonstrates the picture in these words, “When the bishops came together they discovered to their surprise that the progressives were in the majority.”¹⁶ And as Protestants have always been at a distance from the main stream of Catholicism because the Catholics never admitted their point of view but in this Council, the Protestant were able to achieve the target being always on the side of modernist. “Protestants are to be seen as ‘separated brethren’ rather than wicked heretics.”¹⁷

This prominent paradigm shift in the whole structure of Christianity was due to the direct involvement of progressive modernists in the hierarchy of the Church Council - the objective of which is to resolve all kinds of issues (including theological) faced by Christianity. The progressives’ agenda is to unite together all the denominations of the church through the Ecumenical Movement. Lane writes, “The twentieth century saw a great rise in concern for Christian unity. This has been manifested in various ways. The World Council of Churches has sought to bring churches together. There have been common statements on specific doctrines following dialogue between different churches.”¹⁸

As all such dialogues were endangering the very fabric of Christian doctrine, so it was felt necessary to stop them; hence an anti-modernist movement started in the West but “the second Vatican council marked the end of the anti-modernist period.”¹⁹ It had been decided in the Second Vatican Council that the churches of both Protestants and Catholics would jointly work in establishing the message of Jesus Christ. But in 1999, a joint declaration on the doctrine of justification reveals a very important factor in so far as theology of religion is concerned that, ‘Fundamentals never change.’ Therefore, again the same process was initiated. The joint declaration particularly reveals that, “In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that

Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good work."²⁰

This also reveals that even within Christianity, it could not be made possible to unite all differences. Therefore, it is absolutely impossible to unite other religions unless one leaves one's own religion and embraces the other. So far, we have tried to show that the vision behind pluralism in the West is to bring close all the denominations of the churches in which failure is more obvious than success - and the success threatens or distorts the original standpoint of the Churches.

4. Interfaith Dialogue and its Implications

The question that arises is, who are the real beneficiaries behind this rereading of religious history, or simply who started this phenomenon to bring the churches closer - upholders of the churches or others. Martin Forward responds to this question in his book 'Inter-faith Dialogue,' and says, "It has been pluralists who have led this debate, and others who have responded to it."²¹

An extensive and serious reading of such writings explores that religion as fact does not exist, so it is not imperative to choose one or the other. This way, religion will be extinct naturally or at least it will not decide the affairs of life any more. After throwing significant light on the need of a new theology, Martin Forward embarks with the ever emerging new models of science and says that we are facing 'paradigm shift.' He quotes from Alan Race's book, 'Christian and religious pluralism,' which was written to manifest the patterns in the Christian theology of religions in 1993, a recent publication; "Patterns of the Christian theology of religions are three: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. To put these patterns at their simplest: the exclusivist maintains that salvation is given only to those who make an explicit commitment to Jesus Christ; the inclusivism affirms that salvation is bestowed on others besides Christians, and pluralist affirms that humans are saved within their own faith tradition."²²

It is important to note here that the whole debate is from the Christian perspective and this is not because of minute details but it is on the basis of absolute fundamentals. He expounds, "In the council of Florence (1438-1445) it was held that all those outside the church are excluded from salvation. This was officially the Roman Catholic Church's teaching until the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)."²³ This debate reflects that inter-faith dialogue is a recent development started by modernists and those outside the church.

5. Comparative Studies and Pluralism

The advocates of pluralism maintain that if there are differences between religions, they should completely be overlooked and those who are proponent of comparative studies of religions hold that one should go for commonalities between religions. Joachim Wach defines comparative study of religions as a study which "shows similarities in structure."²⁴ He was also a staunch believer in

the plurality of religions as he describes that “Plurality of religion is a global phenomenon, in a sense, Christ, the Buddha, and Mohammad are ‘universal options’ and a religious man must choose his faith despite the environmental factors.”²⁵ Wach is undoubtedly a major figure in the comparative studies of religions and at the same time, a spokesman of pluralism. This indicates all such efforts are to diminish religion as such in the religious perspective.

6. Postmodernism and Pluralism

This whole debate that everything is equally valid, whether it belongs to religion or a notion is the doctrinal attitude of postmodernism. Akbar S. Ahmad relates, “For postmodernist, ideology, Marxist or Buddhist, is just one brand of many available in the shopping mall.”²⁶ The other dominant and essential feature of postmodernism is its strange ambiguity that remains from the first line till the end. The reader ends up with multiple meanings with a plight of confusion. Ahmad writes further, “We don’t live in a world of clear images...in order to discover postmodernism one must look for richness of meaning rather than clarity of meaning.”²⁷ The same author delineates that pluralism is the offshoot of postmodernism. He remarks, “To approach an understanding of the postmodernist age is to presuppose a questioning of, a loss of faith in, the project of modernity; a spirit of pluralism; a heightened skepticism of traditional orthodoxies; and finally a rejection of a view of the world as a universal totality, of the expectation of final solution and complete answers.”²⁸ It is true to say that the whole game revolves around promoting liberalism and secularism which are definitely against the religious paradigm. And it is a combat between religion and anti-religion that will last till doomsday.

Everett Helmut Akum concludes his article in these words, “In the aftermath of September 11, pluralism therefore increasingly became synonymous with religious and cultural diversity and secularism as well as the decentralization of political power typically of the modern west. Thus pluralism has come to signify the tolerance and liberalism of the western tradition as opposed to the closed, totalitarian societies of Islamic fundamentalist.”²⁹

7. Status of the Bible and the Reformation

We have discussed in considerable detail pluralism, modernism, religious studies, new religions, postmodernism and the concept of salvation according to the church authorities. We have also reached an inescapable conclusion that all these desperate and determined efforts are to secure the Bible based Christianity from the inside, and protestant based Christianity from the outside. This is also an attempt to resist strenuously the serious and severe attack of modernism, scientific methodology and postmodernism. A careful investigation of the Bible shows that it was claimed by Christianity that the Bible is the word of God, hence infallible, and the unchallenged supremacy of the Church over one thousand years did not provide the slightest way to reread or interpret the Bible outside the Church. During and after the Reformation period, it was not possible any more to stop the onslaught despite executing a history of persecution and the Inquisition.

In spite of all these meticulous efforts, it remained an unwanted fact that the Bible currently available is not the same as Jesus had delivered.

No personnel of the church ever claimed that the Bible he recites is the same as handed down by Jesus Christ and still more, that the language in which the Bible was written could not be saved; thus what the Christians read today is the translation of the meaning of the inspiration of the followers of Jesus, almost after a hundred years of Jesus' ascension to the heavens. Thereby, it is not difficult to conclude beyond any doubt that human thinking and wisdom had been added to it, which means interpolation in the words of God had been made in its earlier times. And as human text cannot cover all the times on account of limited circumference, hence it cannot meet the standards of all times and spaces. Therefore, the challenge was natural.

8. Orientalists' Design

We have examined earlier that the whole unavoidable debate's circle was inside the church and its offshoots but unfortunately with a purposeful design, the debate crossed the barrier and entered into the domain of other religions, especially Islam. Through orientalism it was aimed to distort Islam as a whole and infuse vagueness in the minds of its followers. Now, the orientalist have prepared their Muslim students for this same purpose though they follow them often unconsciously. Dr. Ghorab writes, "Since the very beginning of the Islamic revival around the turn of the century, the orientalist have (without ever changing their objectives) been re-thinking their general approach and adjusting their tactics. One of the new tactics has been to persuade certain of their Muslim students to act as their agents, especially in Islamic countries."³⁰

9. The Status of the Quran

But the case of Islam is altogether different from all the other revealed or non-revealed religions, the foremost reason is that its text has been preserved by Allah Almighty Himself through the channel of writing and memorizing. Martin Forward beautifully observes this phenomenon in these words, "Muhammad is often instructed to recite the revelation he receives. Moreover, most Muslims, after opening the Quran, move their lips as they read the sacred text, sometimes barely audibly, often out loud, rarely in complete silence. They recite it rather than read it, just as it was originally recited to the prophet Muhammad. Believers recite scripture regularly during formal prayer (salat), and study it at other times, either alone or in a group. During the month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from dawn to dusk, they read one section daily so that by the end of the month, they have recited the whole of the scripture."³¹

Along with this, hundreds of thousands of Muslims all over the world memorize it one can observe around the world they are reciting one and the same recitation. The language of the Quran has also been preserved with all details. This is not less than a miracle. No one can find a single person of any religion who has memorized his religious text.

10. Modern Muslims

As described earlier with reference to Dr. Ghorab, orientalist have successfully prepared their agents and their agenda is to dilute the sacred validity of Islam by confusing it with other unrepresented religions. Muzaffar Iqbal acutely observes this setting. He writes, "A new category of 'Muslims' has been born. They call themselves secular Muslim. This is neither an isolated nor a limited phenomenon. Secular Muslims can be found throughout the world. In all cases they are the darlings of western media seeking to promote a 'tolerant version of Islam'"³² Though it has been happening in the history of Islam but today it is the dominant class in the process of re-interpretation of Islam and such scholars are always wholeheartedly welcomed in conferences. He maintains that "These Muslim intellectuals arrive in conferences, symposia, and workshops which range from discussions on science and religion to purely political affairs...they say, eat, drink and converse with those who are bent on destroying the last remains of Islamic civilization, and this is how they earn their morsels. Indeed, they have bartered their souls for a very small price."³³

Trained by and along with the orientalist are the Muslim scholars who want to re-interpret and re-read Islam from the direct sources leaving aside the tradition. They do not say that they are distorting the message of Islam as such but what they do is not less than this. Abdullah Saeed in his book outlines the peculiar features of these scholars, calling them modernist with these words, "Central to the modernist approach is the idea of reform...Muslims needed their own Martin Luther to initiate a major reform of the Islamic heritage...the modernist context demanded a reappraisal of the intellectual heritage of Muslims...it also includes the idea for a flexible interpretation of Islam and its sources in order to develop ideas compatible with modern conditions...to understand the Quran from a scientific worldview."³⁴

11. The Qur'an and Pluralism

After having discussed various dimensions of pluralism, it is pertinent to illustrate some of the verses of the Holy *Quran* which modernist scholars have differently defined, contrary to traditional approach of the Muslim exegete.

The Holy *Quran* approves that only Islam is acceptable to Allah. The *Quran* says, "The religion before God is Islam (submission to His Will). If anyone desires a religion other than Islam never will it be accepted of him; in the hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost."³⁵ Dr. Adnan Aslam, in his article, explains this verse in these words, "But the interesting thing here is that the verses that point to an exclusivist attitude in Islam are ambiguous and open to interpretation; they can be interpreted from the perspective of an 'Islamic pluralism' as well as of an Islamic exclusivism."³⁶ He elaborates further, "Muslim position is clear. The Muslim does not claim to have a religion peculiar to himself. Islam is not a sect or an ethnic religion. In its view, all religion is one, for the truth is one."³⁷

The point here to say is that this verse is not ambiguous; hence not open to interpretation and the practice of the modernists is to turn this verse in support of pluralism. It is fitting to relate some of the commentaries from traditional point of view.

1. Dr. Mohsin Khan, in his commentary of the Quran, under the above mentioned verse, explains with reference to a *Hadith* of Bukhari, it is obligatory to have belief in the Messengership of the Prophet (Muhammad, PBUH). “Narrated Abu Hurairah: Allah’s Messenger said: By Him (Allah) in Whose Hand Muhammad’s soul is, there is none from amongst the Jews and the Christians who hears about me and then dies without believing in the message with which I have been sent, but he will be from the dwellers of the Fire.”³⁸
2. Amin Ahsan Islahi is also of the same view that after explaining in detail the arguments in support of Islam, neither Jews’ religion nor Christians’ religion will be accepted before Allah.³⁹
3. Maulana Maudoodi while explaining verse 3:70 (then whosoever shall turn away from this covenant, they are the transgressors) says, “The purpose of this statement is to warn the Jews and the Christians that they were desecrating the pledge they had made to God, and, by disbelieving in and opposing the prophet Muhammad (SAW), they were violating the terms of the pledge made by their prophets. They had become ‘transgressors’, for they had broken the bond of obedience to God.”⁴⁰

Another verse of the Holy *Quran* is often quoted by pluralists, “Whether they are the ones who believe (in the Arabian prophet), or whether they are Jews, Christians or Sabians — all who believe in Allah and the Last Day, their reward is surely secure with their Lord; they need have no fear, nor shall they grieve.”⁴¹ Dr. Adnan Aslan writes, “Although the Quran explicitly states that those Jews, Christians, and Sabians who believe in God and the Last Day and work righteously will attain salvation. Muslim scholars generally have related salvation of the non-Muslims with the recognition of the Prophet by referring to the overall attitude of the Quran towards non-Muslims. Even if this might be the case, they still maintained that salvation has always possible outside the borders of Islam.”⁴² Again such interpretation is just to accommodate the non-Muslim; the question is whether it is their demand to have salvation from the Muslim perspective or is it our own wishful thinking?

Followings are the explanations of the above cited verse from traditional perspective.

1. Maulana Maudoodi writes, “The context of the verse makes it clear that it is not attempting to enumerate in detail all the articles of faith in which one should believe...the aim of the verse is merely to repudiate the illusion cherished by the Jews that, by virtue of their being Jews, they have monopoly of salvation.”⁴³

2. Amin Ahsan Islahi expounds that with a little thought one can reach to this obvious point that how is it possible to believe in the Quran without believing in Prophet Muhammad (SAW). He further writes after Prophet Muhammad (SAW), it is out of question that people of the Book will deserve God's blessings. And Prophet Muhammad (SAW) preached openly in vivid words to believe in him. And on this earth, the preserved message of God is only the Quran and outside this there is no right guided way. And only those people will be saved who will remain ignorant to this message.⁴⁴

Believing in the finality of prophethood demands that salvation absolutely depends on believing this final divine message with all its features. The Holy *Quran* stresses on the respect of other religions and asks its believers for religious tolerance (or religious acceptance) but there is no scope at all of religious pluralism as it is utterly a methodological device to subvert 'religion as such.'

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