

Nature Religion, People's Religion and Universal Religion: Classification of Religion

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I. Introduction

The history of humanity shows that it is human nature to depend on a greater power that demonstrates control over the human race. This tendency to recognize the existence of a supernatural power governing the universe leads humanity to acknowledge its own limit. Consequently it results in paying high respect and trust in the Unknown Reality who is universally called GOD. This disposition to depend on God is the beginning of religion. Although it is defined in many different expressions, the word "religion" remains as the underlying reality that determines the existence of peoples whether or not they acknowledge that there is God. The existence of various forms of religious expressions indicates that by nature human beings are religious. Similarly it demonstrates how the impact of religion and the fanaticism that goes with it influenced relationships among individuals and nations.

But if human dependence on a greater power is universal why are there many religions today? If religion has a bearing in human existence why are people divided and alienated from each other?

This paper attempts to answer the above questions on the basis of the evolution of the following classification of religions, namely, Nature Religion, People's Religion and Universal Religion.

II. Nature as Object of Religion

The question on the source of religion is one of the important themes in the science of religion. Max Müller believes that the origin of humanity's religiosity comes either from man's view of nature or from the elementary experience of nature as such. An important aspect in Müller's theory is the emphasis he placed in the quickening of human self-consciousness of the majesty of nature. He believes that the personification of natural phenomenon in all deities is a normal consequence of religiosity for the early civilizations. The primitive humanity lacks a communicative skill to describe the idea of the supernatural or eternity. As such the role of feeling is an indispensable component in the religious experience in nature religion.¹

Nature worship is as old as civilization. This goes hand in hand with the emergence of people and culture. People who experience always the deadly natural catastrophe look at nature with fear and horror. In a culture with an animistic tradition, the movements and changes of nature like the flight of the bird, the barking of dogs, the singing lizards, and the like are looked upon with serious consideration for they may either bring good or bad omen depending on the circumstances. To people who are close to nature like the farmers, the seamen and the mountain people, nature becomes the object of respect and worship. Nature is believed to have respective gods like the god of the harvest, a fire god, a war god, a god of hell and other deities with the corresponding functions.

¹ Karl-Heinz Kohl, "Naturreligion. Zur Transformationsgeschichte eines Begriffs," 207f.

These gods have a direct influence upon the living people. It is no wonder that they worship the sun and the moon, trees, rocks or certain animals and birds by not harming them, offering food to them or not cutting the trees fit for firewood. These they do so that in return the gods could give them safety, good harvest and good fortunes and not a threat to their existence.¹ Again, this is so because nature is viewed not only as the source of physical power on earth. It has also a spiritual dimension. Thus diseases or illnesses are attributed to the environmental spirits or soul-spirits of the dead relatives.²

1. The Structure of Nature Religion

Hans-Jürgen Greschat makes a comprehensive summary of what nature religion is. The following show how nature religion is distinguished from historical religions like Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam:

First, the faith system of nature religion is not fixed, since it has no specific founder. The roots and history of

¹ Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *History of the Pilipino People*, 8th ed. (Quezon City: Garotech, 1990), 44f., 47. Nature worship is also intelligible in Hinduism for the incarnation of Vishnu can be embodied in an animal. See George Foot Moore, *History of Religions*, vol. 1, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1950), 330.

² This is true for instance to China whose religion is believed to have been a "union of nature worship and ancestor worship." The heavenly bodies have their gods, so with weather and clouds, rain, wind, and thunder. The mountains, rivers and seas and crops have their spirits. Nature has power and these powers are regarded spirits. Not to overlook the fact that Chinese offer worship to the "tutelary deities of the empire, and its cities and towns. Therefore spirits are not only confined to celestial or terrestrial powers. They are in human beings as well. Thus the spirits of former statesmen, sages, the patrons of industries are not excluded from the hierarchy of spirit. At the head stands Heaven, the Supreme Emperor, followed by Earth with the titles of a great feudatory prime. The deceased emperor of the reigning dynasty comes next, outranking the sun and moon. See Moore, *History of Religions*, 6.

such a religion points back to the origin of the world, that means to the original time or the original people. The task of religion then is to keep the order of life based on its origins.

Second, nature religion has no holy scriptures. Its own texts are orally transmitted and are further passed on to the next generation. This explains why it is easy for these oral texts to adopt to every new situation.

Third, the notion of revelation is recognized in nature religion as a superhuman will. It has no preachers or theologians like in Christianity. But it has visionaries, media, prophets and oracle priests. Questions of supernatural characters are answered through dreams, visions, auditions, inspirations, oracle system, and the like. The answers however are always sought when the source of catastrophe remains vague, because hunger, epidemics and defeats cease as soon as their cause is identified.

Fourth, man understands salvation in the so-called nature religion as ethical actions. The eschatological questions are determined by contemporary actions. Religion in this sense is decisive in so far as it maintains the direction of history by anchoring the present and even the future to the original ordered world.

Fifth, in nature religion, man believes in a gift, which man receives from above and must be guarded as a valuable good. In this view, the believers think that people with special gifts have a connection with the supernatural powers. Here rituals play an important function in facilitating a right reception of such a gift. What is important however in nature religion is its anthropological implication. Greschat observes that in nature religion humanity is not raised to become lord over creations. Rather a person is regarded only as a creature who understands himself as a brother among brothers.¹

¹ Hans-Jürgen Greschat, "Naturreligion," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol 24. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 186-88.

Nature religion does not have a concrete source of religious authority. Religious authority is based on experience. The question of course is: "Is there any relativization of religious authority in nature religion, since its authority is based on experience?" Obviously a relativization of authority is inevitable in nature religion. Even in historical religions which have a solid dogma, a subjective interpretation of dogma cannot be evaded. If this is so, how much more it is in nature religion in which its organizational structure and beliefs are loose.

Lastly the idea of "God and the world" are not seen as separable entities in nature religion. God is seen both as a personal and impersonal source of gifts from above and the notion of the "profane and the "sacred" are intertwined in this religion.¹

2. People's Religion

Herm Rehberg defines religion as either a result of long years of cultural processes in which the whole community has collectively worked with, or a work of excellent great men²

Such a definition of religion leads to the notion of people's religion. To understand what people's religion is, is to first ask the question, "Who produces religion?" and not "What it is religion?" It is only when the "who" in religion is raised that the "what" of it is properly grasped. Therefore to understand people's religion is to begin with anthropology and not with metaphysics since people are the real bearers of religion. It was people who produced, preserved and passed on sacred texts.³

Harvey Cox characterizes people's religion as "the collective stories of a whole people [and]is usually mixed

¹ Greschat, "Naturreligion," *TRE*, 187.

² Herm Rehberg, *Die Prinzipien der monistischen Naturreligion* (Jena: Hermann Dabis, 1883) p.??

³ Harvey Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit: The Use and Misuse of People's Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 144.

with superstition, custom and kitsch."¹ People's religion has two types, namely folk religion of the ordinary people and popular religion. Popular religion is considered outside the historical religion. Yet both represent a "collective stories" of people. For Cox, people's religion is a web into the nets of people's collective corporate remembrance, dream, cry and longing for identity and dignity; a longing for survival from the past and present stories of symbols of contradictions.²It is the people's own soul. As Cox puts it quite clearly:

"Whatever inner contradictions it houses, it serves an essential purpose for those whose collective consciousness it represents. When the 'soul' departs, as mortals have known since the beginning of time, the body soon dies too."³

Central in Cox's understanding of people's religion is the idea of religion as "the seedbed and spawning ground of stories." He defines "stories" in this context as the external expression of human association rooted in the interior attitudes like emotion, value and history and how they are blended into the whole social structure of relationships. These stories preserved the past through memories expressed in parables, jokes, sagas, fairy tales, myths, fables, epics and yarns. Or oftentimes they are acted in the form of dances, songs or demonstrated by way of dressing and other practices and ways of the people. For Cox such stories and practices are important since they depict the people's search for a meaningful existence. Hence a religion continues to exist because these different forms of people's stories nourish religion.⁴

In this sense folks or people's religion has three basic contents: First it tells the answer to the question of origin of humanity and the problem of human predica-

¹ Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit*, 10.

² Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit*, 117.

³ Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit*, 121.

⁴ Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit*, 12.

ment of falling. In the Christian Bible this is called the "myths of the origin of creation and fall." Second, it presents an ideal possibility for humanity to aim for "salvation or satori or nirvana" or the ideal life as exemplified by saints and holy people. Third it provides the way to overcome the problem of human predicament of finitude in order to achieve the aim for what is ideal. In Christianity, this is called the "means of grace."¹

For this reason the value of community life and family relationship is indispensable in people's religion. The well-being of the community is dependent upon the holistic vitality of the people. Thus life is seen collectively and as a unity. Politics, religion and society are not bifurcated from the idea of the fullness of life.² Therefore like nature religion, people's religion is religion of community life. One person belongs to his community.³

2.1. Aspects of People's Religion

The veneration of ancestors is an important characteristic of people's religion. In African culture, the lives of the people are related to God who is called in many different names. But the divine life of the living is mediated by the first ancestor of the family or tribe. The dead have their continuing influence upon the fate of the living. A divine life is the source of vitality in society. Such a life is protected by the ancestors against the evil spirit. Thus the dead lead their living generations from misfortunes and sufferings to liberation. They protect the present life of the people and guarantee their future.⁴

¹ Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit*, 14. Eliade also recognizes the importance of stories and myths in nature religion. See Mircea Eliade, *Geschichte der Religiösen Ideen*, vol 3.1. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1983), 249f.

² John Parrat, *Theologiegeschichte der Dritten Welt: Afrika* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1991), 174.

³ Greschat, "Naturreligion," 188.

⁴ Parrat, 174-77. Ancestral worship on the other hand produces an

It is not surprising that death is not considered as the end of life or a separation from the earthly life. The dead is not detached from his relatives. Death is looked at as a journey to another form of life, since the dead person will be revered as an honored ancestor in his death. Hence a dead person is then described as a "living dead."¹ Therefore the ancestors have decisive influences in the African tradition. They are the source of hope and also of fear, since they serve as mediators between the present world and beyond it.

In the Christian definition, the word "nature" is understood only in the context of creation.² It means then that nature is not separable from creation, for creation is understood in relation to God, the Creator. For instance Augustine describes the character of nature allegorically and symbolically as the second book of God's revelation. Nature is the medium and the Bible of God's revelation. The natural happenings are then dependent upon the creative will of God.³

The question however is: Is nature alone the only book of God's revelation?

Certainly natural philosophers and natural theologians will offer a negative answer. They believe that God's revelation can also work in the natural knowledge of human beings. I will not however further discuss this subject as it is outside the perimeter of my theme. Nonetheless,

ambivalent effect upon the Africans. As Bruce Borquist and Ann Borquist, former American Peace Corp. volunteers in Ghana observed: "From our experience, the motivating power behind unalloyed ancestor worship is fear and greed: fear of what the ancestors could do to hurt you and greed in trying to get those spirit powers on your side so you could get or do what you want. African Christians set free from this know what freedom in Jesus means!" (Interview via e-mail, Feb. 9, 1997).

¹ Kwese Dickson, "The Theology of the Cross," *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt (London: SPCK, 1987), 87f.

² Friso Melzer, *Gott oder Götze? Grundfragen evangelischer Religionswissenschaft* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler, 1983), 25.

³ Greschat, "Naturreligion," 102.

what is worth quoting here is the critique of David Hume, an English philosopher and deist, against nature religion.

Hume differentiates the structure of world view between nature religion and nature philosophy. He argues that the original form of religion does not start with the natural idea as in natural philosophy. Rather it is a product of experience and of dependence of earlier people on nature. Hume holds that such a dependence on nature is practically the result of one's limited knowledge of the laws of nature. Hence, primitive humanity projected their feelings and their actions towards the external world. Human sufferings were viewed as the product of unknown supernatural power in nature. Consequently, the natural happenings explicitly determine the existence of humanity. For that reason, the gods were looked upon with fear, or were believed to be the source of hope and power of humanity. In this regard, Hume traces the emergence of polytheistic religions to the natural religion. He rejects the metaphysical explanation of a divine Creator in nature religion. For him studies of nature and its natural laws are the products of the educated idea and has no place in nature religion.¹

But to the question on the relationship between nature religion and Christianity Terturlian's view is worth noting. Tertulian pursues to make a marriage between nature religion and Christianity in the following statement: "God must be recognized through nature and then through doctrines. From nature through his works and from doctrines through his revealed words."²

¹ Hume, *Nature Religion* 1755.

² Terturlian, *Contra Marcionem*, 1.18.

III. The Universal Religion: Is There such a Religion?

This section aims at exploring the concept of religion in a broader perspective. Primarily, it focuses on the notion of religion as universal. In carrying out this survey, the following set of distinctions are to be explained under the following themes: (a) Universal Religion understood as Universal Spirituality, (b) Christianity as a Universal Religion?: The Inclusivistic Approach and (c) Religious Pluralism: A Universal Religion?

1. Universal Spirituality and the Universalization of Esoteric Experience

First universal spirituality points to a spontaneous self-discovery of God not through received doctrines but through an experience of God or of the divine presence. Similar to the "New Age Movement's" understanding, spirituality in this regard is explained as a mystical experience or as esoteric.¹

Central in the theology of the so-called New Age Movement is the notion of God understood both as a personal and an impersonal God. But more important than a cognitive knowledge of him is an experience of his presence in one's life. God is thought of as a "divine within" who is discovered in the process of self-exploration. Such an experience is commonly called a cosmic feeling, since God transcends all barriers of distinctions. Cosmic feeling is understood to mean the "presence of God within."

¹ Mysticism is defined as a "common language, uttering a common experience. There is only one great underground river, though there are numerous wells into Buddhist wells and Taoists wells, Native American wells and Christian wells, Islamic wells and Judaic wells." See Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 230, as quoted by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *The New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden/New York/Köhl: E.J. Brill, 1996), 328.

Such a consciousness of God's presence suggests the truth of God's existence in contrast to the rationalization or psychologization of the concept of God. In this sense, God is understood according to one's personal history and interpretation of God who speaks to him from "within" the way Eva Pierrako explicitly describes God. She writes:

Think of God as being, among so many other things, *life* and *life force*. Think of God as of an electric current, endowed with supreme intelligence. This electric current is there, in you, around you, outside yourself. ... God is not a person residing in a certain place, though it is possible to have a personal God-experience within the self. For the only place God can be looked for and found is within, not in any other place. God's existence can be deduced outside of the self from the beauty of Creation, from the manifestations of nature, from the wisdom collected by philosophers and scientists. But such observations become an experience of God only when God's presence is felt first within. The inner experience of God is the greatest experience of all experiences because it contains all desirable experiences.¹

What is obvious in the theological emphasis of universal spirituality is the universality of this cosmic experience which is no less than accessible to everyone. Unlike the historical religions, universal spirituality is characterized by religious tolerance, and inclusivism. It possesses no established set of doctrines. It believes that each religious path is complementary to another leading to the final goal of universal truth.²

¹ Eva Pierrako, *The Pathwork of Self-Transformation* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 51 as quoted by Hanegraaff, *The New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 184.

² Hanegraaff, *The New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 329f.

2. Inclusivism and the Universalization of the Christian Religion

From the theology of religion, "inclusivism" is understood as a "dialectical yes and no" phenomenon. In Christian theology, the yes and no dialectics both means the acceptance and the rejection of the non-Christian religious claims. The Christian acceptance of other religious truth lies on the basic assumption that God's presence is manifested in the spiritual and religious claims of the non-Christian religions. The Christian rejection of the non-Christian religious tradition is grounded on the latter's rejection of the person of the historical Jesus as the universal point and the final revelation and mediator of God for the salvation of humanity.¹

2.1. Roots of Inclusivism

A. Acts of the Apostles by Luke

Proponents of the inclusivistic theory of religion draw inspiration from the works of Luke. Central in Luke's theology is the so-called salvation history. Salvation history means that God's action of grace is operative in history which finds its highest fulfillment in the historical Jesus. God's presence in history is not however confined in the Christian tradition alone. Luke illustrates this point in his story about Cornelius where Peter says: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him "(Acts 10: 35). Moreover at Lystra, Luke writes concerning Paul and Barnabas' message to the people, "In past generations he [God] allowed all nations to walk in their own ways; yet *he did not leave himself without witness....* (Acts 14:16f). Lastly, Luke reports about Paul's discourse

¹ Alan Race, *Christians And Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1982), 38.

with the Greeks in Areopagus which explicitly explains the inclusiveness of Jesus Christ (Acts 17: 22-31). Luke writes that Paul acknowledges that the men of Athens have their own knowledge of God, a God who is however unknown. On the basis of that knowledge, Paul goes on to say by apologetically identifying the "anonymous God" of the Athenians with the name of Jesus Christ, who resurrected from the dead and will later on come back to judge both the living and the dead.

The Lukan accounts implies two things for inclusivist theory: First Luke shows that the person of Jesus is the final fulfillment of all human expectations and prophecies in history. Second the historical Jesus is also the fulfillment of God's dealing with humanity in history. Yet behind these two implications is the fundamental argument that Jesus Christ is not detached from history, since Jesus has long been there before history began.

B. Justin Martyr and His Influence

Another important figure in Church History who follows and enriches Luke's inclusivist position is Justin Martyr. For instance Justin writes:

It is our belief that those men who strive to do good which is enjoined on us have a share in God; according to our traditional belief they will by God's grace share his dwelling. And it is our conviction that this holds good in principle for all men.¹

Moreover, Justin Martyr intensifies the inclusivism theory of Christology through his Logos theology. Justin, who was perhaps influenced by Stoic philosophy, believes that all men participate in the universal cosmic Reason, by virtue of the *logos spermatikos*, the eternal divine Logos that permeates in men's intrinsic rationality.²

¹ As cited by Race, *Christians And Religious Pluralism*, 42.

² As cited by Race, *Christians And Religious Pluralism*, 42

He argues: "Christ is the divine Word in whom the whole human race share, and those who live according to the light of their knowledge are Christians, even if they are considered as being godless."¹

Viewed from the theology of religion, Luke's position on the "history of salvation" and Justin's notion of the Logos in Christ imply that all religious truths before Christ serve as preparatory gospels and all leads to Christ as the final end. This does not however imply a complete rejection of the religious teachings of the non-Christian religions. Rather the non-Christian religions have still a place in the history of salvation.

C. The Vatican II Declaration

It is interesting to note how Justin Martyr's position has preceded the position of the modern inclusivists. Undoubtedly he has infused a visible influence upon the Vatican II's *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*.²

The inclusivistic theory is further elaborated by Karl Rahner, a well-known Roman Catholic theologian in his thesis:

Until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion... does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God, elements, moreover, mixed up with human depravity... It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given... on account of Christ. For this reason a non-Christian religion can be recognized as a lawful religion.³

¹ As cited by Race, *Christians And Religious Pluralism*, 43.

² See *Vatikan II: Vollständige Ausgabe der Konzilsbeschlüsse*, spezial Vol. 44, eds. Albrecht Beckel, Hugo Reiring and Otto B. Roegele (Os-nabrück: A. Fromm, 1966), 636.

³ Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 60f.

Here Rahner admits that the presence of Christ cannot be limited within the Christian tradition. Rather Christ transcends the boundaries of religions. Upon this claim, Rahner treats other non-Christian religions positively. He wrote:

Christianity does not simply confront the members of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian.¹

Undoubtedly, Justin's view of Christ as the *Logos* is fundamental in Rahner's concept of the "anonymous Christian".² While it is true that the Christian Church may recognize the presence of Christ in non-Christian religions, it is obvious that the Christian Church maintains the view that Christianity is the center among the historical religions. This is for instance reflected in the Vatican II declaration.³

Despite such a claim, this official statement of the Church signals a new development in the position of the Church from exclusivism to inclusivism. That is, it considers the non-Christian religions as the bearers of truth as well. However this is so only in the secondary sense. That means that the Vatican II Declaration still maintains the superiority of God's revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. For the inclusivists this implies that the salvation of a good Hindu is not produced by Hinduism, but by Christ through the Sacraments and the Mysteries of Hin-

¹ Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 75.

² Similarly Raymond Panikkar joins Rahner's inclusivist position by arguing that Christ is also at work in Hinduism, for Christ is in Hinduism. Thus, in seeking for a meeting point between Hinduism and Christianity, Panikkar proposes to introduce the notion of the "unknown Christ" in Hinduism. See Raymondo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, (London: Darto, Longman and Todd, 1968), part. 28-68.

³ Vatikan II: 636.

duism.¹ The same idea is expressed by Dr. J.N. Farquhar of the Indian YMCA in his "theory of fulfillment". He writes:

Christ provides the fulfillment of the highest aspirations of Hinduism... In Him is focused every ray of light that shines in Hinduism. He is the Crown of the Faith of India.²

In the theory of inclusivism, the historical Jesus is considered the axis of all religions. While the inclusivists are open to other non-Christian traditions, the centrality of the historical Jesus is decisive in the sense that he is the ultimate answer to humanity's quest for meaning and salvation. In the inclusivist theories, the central place of Christianity in history is not accidental. Its late coming in history is providential, since it is associated with the coming of the historical Jesus as God's ultimate historical revelation. Thus it follows then that if Christianity appears apologetic in its attitude towards other non-Christian religions, this is to be understood in the light of its claim for the absolute character of the historical Jesus, who is the locus of its religious tradition.

Again, what is clear in this position is the attempt of the post Vatican II theologian to universalize the Christian tradition through the spiritualization of Christ. Not wanting to lose the historical character of the Christian religion, inclusivists like Rahner or Panikkar engage in a reinterpretation of the language of the Christian dogma to connect other non-Christian traditions to the Christian religion. Hence a theory of inclusivism is no less than an attempt to make Christianity a "universal religion" of humanity.

To wit, the inclusivist theory maintains the following assumptions: First, it is undebatable that there is inner

¹ Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 54.

² As cited by Race, *Christians And Religious Pluralism*, 57.

depth of faith in all religious traditions, a faith in which humanity seeks to be transformed from what is not to what it should be. Second, all religions despite their independent historical origins and developments have one Source of origin who is the object of faith and who may be called by many different names. Third, the Incarnation of the Logos is the expression of God's Spirit dwelling in all men. This Logos is no less than Jesus Christ, the final and ultimate expression of divine revelation and salvation in history.

Indeed such an inclusivist perspective of God's historical special revelation in Christianity poses a problem for other non-Christian religions. If Christ is truly the locus of all religions, "Why did Christ come so late?" This question has not been properly answered. It is for this reason that we need to turn to another expression of universal religion which attempts to radicalize the inclusivistic claims.

3. Pluralism and the Universalization of the Historical Religions

The idea of religious pluralism should be understood as a product of the development of knowledge in the history of religions. Its root could be traced back to the eighteenth century where interest for historical science dominated almost all levels of scientific disciplines. Undoubtedly, historical science has infiltrated theology. One obvious example of this is the indelible impact left by the Quest for the Historical Jesus Movement in the last 150 years upon the Christendom in Europe and in the English-speaking continents. Such a movement shows how historical critical science can challenge if not transform the orthodox Christian faith.

In no way can one also deny, that the rise of historical criticism is the product of knowledge in the history of religions. The explosion of historical knowledge in religion leads to a critical study of the Near Eastern culture and

its influences upon the biblical documents in the process of the inception of the Christian faith and dogma.

A concrete example of how the history of religion changes the theological gears of the Christian theologian is Ernst Troeltsch's *Das Wesen der Religion*. Here Troeltsch thinks of Christianity not as the absolute religion. What is clear for Troeltsch is that Christianity is a cultural religion which reflects primarily the European culture. In contrast to the exclusivist claim, Troeltsch moves towards the relativism of the Christian religion and looks at it as one of the manifestations of the divine in one culture. For instance Troeltsch writes:

The evidence we have for this remains essentially the same, whatever may be our theory concerning absolute validity—it is the evidence of a profound inner experience. This experience is undoubtedly the criterion of its validity, but, be it noted, only of its validity for us. It is God's countenance as revealed to us; it is the way in which, being what we are, we receive, and react to, the revelation of God.¹

Unquestionably Troeltsch paves the way for the rise of today's religious pluralism. His position focuses on the God's continuing operation in the history of religions. He looks at Christianity not as an absolute religion but as co-existence with other non-Christian religions in search for religious truth. Following the Hegelian structure of thought, Troeltsch believes that a universal religious truth or faith will develop in the course of human history.²

¹ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1972), 111f.

² Ernst Troeltsch, "The Place of Christianity among the World Religions," *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 11-31. Similarly, Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues: "Co-existence, if not a final truth of man's diversity, would seem at least an immediate necessity, and indeed, an immediate virtue." Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The Christian in a Religiously Plural World," *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 11-31.

3.1. The Names of God

The notion of religious pluralism begins with a study of comparative religions. The central point in religious pluralism is the question of God. This leads to an interest in the study of the directory of gods. God has many names. From the literature and traditions of India we find God whose names are Rudra, Agni, Mitra, Indra, Varuna. From the Near East God is called Osiris, Isis, Horus, Ra, Jahweh. From the southern Europe, God was known as Jupiter, Apollo, Dionysus, Poseidon while in northern Europe God is called Odin, Thor, Balder, Vali, Woden. In Africa, God is addressed as Nabongo, Luhanga, Nyame, Lesa, Ruhanga. And we go to America, Asia and Australia, what we have would be a long list of names from A to Z.

What does this imply? Proponents of religious pluralism argue that God's revelation is general. God is known to people in different names and forms.¹ But all humanity makes a response to a transcendent divine Reality. Their responses may vary. But they reflect an awareness of the supernatural.² This awareness of the divine are experienced and expressed in many different ways, since each religion responds to this divine Reality according to its historical backgrounds and experiences. These religious thoughts and experiences serve then as the mediators between humanity and the "Ultimate Reality". While human religious consciousness and experiences are limited and imperfect in nature, they are proofs of a special encounter with God either personally or impersonally.³

blethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 96.

¹ John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 59.

² Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 40-59.

³ John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, repr. 1988), 38f.

3.2. Characteristics of a Pluralistic Religion

It interestingly shows how religious pluralists like John Hick reject any Marxist and Freudian concepts of religion as a matter of human delusion and projection. His grounds are two-fold: First, reflections, conceptualization and reconstruction of religious ideas cannot ignore the divine and natural realities. Second, the patterns of interpretative concepts are the results of various human perceptions and consciousness of a reality. And to some extent these perceptions are influenced by one's cultural background.¹

It follows further that no religion possesses any absolute claim for truth. A Hindu cannot say that access to the *sanatana Dharna*, the eternal truth, incarnated in human language in the Veda, should lead him to believe that he has more advanced and superior awareness of truth than others. Or Muslims cannot say that the Qur'an is God's final words of commandments which the whole of humanity should obey. Or the Christians cannot say that Jesus Christ is alone the final expression of God's incarnation. Therefore, they can declare *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church, no salvation) or the Protestant equivalent, "Outside Christianity, no salvation."²

Religious pluralism rejects any exclusivist dogma of any particular religion. Exclusivism like inclusivism, demonstrates a feeling of religious arrogance and superiority over others. Thus religious superiority does not belong to the vocabulary of religious pluralism. As argued by Hick, religious pluralism speaks of world faith and not of a particular faith. Thus he regards each religion as "alternative soteriological spaces within which, or ways along which men and women can find salva-

¹ Hick, *God Has Many Names* 102-105.

² Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 46-51.

tion/liberation/fulfillment.¹ Hick proceeds to concretize his philosophy of pluralism by departing himself from the orthodox Christian theology. He radicalizes his theology by aligning Christianity with the rest of the historical religions. He calls this pluralistic view of religion, "the Copernican revolution." His theory states that Christianity should not be the center in the planetarium of religious faith, but rather God. That means, that all religions revolve around God following their own theological orbits. Upon this theory, Hick moves to interpret the Incarnation of Jesus mythologically.²

Another important aspect in the rise of the theory of religious pluralism is conditioned by the awareness of the social and political situations of time. An interest for a common understanding among historical religions are instigated by their common question on the role of religion in the world of suffering, exploitations, threats of environmental deluge and the like. In this respect, a new word comes out as an expression of that concern for the whole plight of humanity. The word is "ecumenism".

Ecumenicism arose as 'a word of the atomic age, of the jet age, of the age of unprecedented social and international mobility, opportunity and peril.'³ Originally the word comes from the Greek word "oikoumene" which means "the whole inhabited world." Doubtless because of this association, the ancient church adopted it to mean, "die Kirche als ganze betreffend." But in a broader definition of the word, "oikoumene" includes a humanization of

¹ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 47.

² See John Hick, "Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine," *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 181-186.

³ See Huston Smith, "Identification of Problem: The Irenic Potential of Religion," *Religious Pluralism and World Community: Interfaith and Intercultural Communication*, ed. Edward J. Jurji (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), 27 quoting George Williams, "Dimensions of Roman Catholic Ecumenism," *International Association for Religious Freedom Papers on Religion in the Modern World*, Number 1, 1.

the world and uniting the whole humanity which could either lead to pluralism or syncretism of religions.¹

It expresses a sense of openness to spiritual proximity and serves as a bridge across religious differences. It defines the religious response to the growing political and social tensions which alienate peoples and cultures. For instance, questions such as: Would Pakistan be partitioned from India if Hinduism and Islam were disparate? Would there be quarrels between Israel and Palestine today "if Judaism were not a historic community distinct from Islam?"

4. Appraisal

Religious problems are no doubt inseparable from political problems. In fact, it is undeniable that in most cases, religion is one of the sources of political problems in the world. Cardinal Newman rightly expressed this mode of religious problems: "Oh, how we hate one another for the love of God!"²

It is upon this context where the question of the role of religion as a potential agent of reconciliation is raised. Can the so-called historical religions unite in spite of their diversities in dogma in the face of the political conflicts that beset humanity? Can they tame the powers of nations and individual persuasions in search for peace? Given these social and political challenges of time, a religious dialogue is considered imperative in addressing not only the religious questions but in maximizing its potential

¹ Such a broader definition of the Greek word, "oikoumene" becomes however the major focus of criticism against the World Council of Churches (WCC). Critics consider the WCC's understanding of "oikoumene" as a tendency towards a secularization of the Christian mission and the reduction of the gospels to purely social, ethical and political programs. See Erich Geldbach and Gerhard Ruhbach, "Ökumenische Bewegung," *Evangelisches Lexikon für Theologie und Gemeinde* (Wuppertal and Zürich: R. Brockhaus, 1994), 1468-1471.

² Smith, "Identification of Problem," 21.

towards peacemaking. A religious dialogue on social sufferings and humanitarian cooperation however is not as difficult to undertake as a dialogue on dogmatic issues and claims for truth. All historical religions can work together in addressing the socio-political problems that directly affect them. This is because the longing for liberation from all forms of human sufferings and exploitations is a universal dream.

But things are different on matters of epistemological concerns like doctrinal discussions or dialogues. The goal for the unity of religions is yet a long process. Although it must be admitted that there had been a number of inter-religious dialogues that have been conducted on philosophical and theological levels, it still remains hard to arrive at a consensus of religious and philosophical consensus. The problem of suspicion and distrust continues to linger among religious leaders as to the sincerity of the dialogues.¹ Is the religious claim for the absolute truth a demonstration of religious arrogance and intolerance?

¹ For instance Stanley Samatra, former director of the Dialogue Programme of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, quoted the reaction of a Hindu who declined the Christian invitation for a continuing inter-dialogue: "Do not think that I am against dialogue ... On the contrary, I am fully convinced that dialogue is an essential part of human life, and therefore of religious life itself. ... Yet, to be frank with you, there is something which makes me uneasy in the way in which you Christians are now trying so eagerly to enter into official and formal dialogue with us. Have you already forgotten that what you call 'inter-faith dialogue' is quite a new feature in your understanding and practice of Christianity? Until a few years ago, and often still today, your relations with us were confined, either to merely the social plane, or to preaching in order to convert us to your *dharma*. ... For all matters concerning *dharma* you were deadly against us, violently or stealthily according to cases. ... And the pity was that your attacks and derogatory remarks were founded in sheer ignorance of what we really are, or what we believe and worship. ... The main obstacles to dialogue are, on the one hand, a feeling of superiority and, on the other, the fear of losing one's identity." *Dialogue Between Men of Living Faith*, (WCC Geneva, 1971), 22f.

It is hard to give an objective answer to that question. But what is actually more decisive is the practical question of why an honest and open inter-religious dialogue remains an impossible possibility. The reasons are two-fold:

First, inter-religious dialogue requires a great amount of openness to rethink, self-criticize and reinterpret each religious tradition. And it is evident that even within each religion, this in itself is a difficult task and will not invite any popular acceptance. For instance, if one attempts to interpret the incarnation of Logos or Jesus metaphorically or mythically like what John Hick and others do, how many Christians would accept that view? Or how many Buddhist would accept the Christian understanding of *satori* as the inner witness of the Holy Spirit?¹

Second, it is still difficult for all historical religions to regard themselves as equal and on the same level with others. If Christianity will insist for its superiority in account of its Christology, Hinduism will immediately claim for its supremacy being the oldest religion in the world. To regard each religion like "ecclesiastical ethnicity" could hardly be accepted by each religion. Normally the tendency for each religion is to compare each other's claim for truth, and then judge it on the basis of one's particular religious tradition. Certainly the outcome is an endless conflict among historical religions. The reason is primary: It is hard for a certain religion to sacrifice a part of its religious tradition in favor of the claims of other religions. If it does, it takes a high level of religious maturity and tolerant attitude to accept the idea that all religions are co-existent and complementary in search for a religious truth.

¹ See C.S. Song, *Theologie des Dritten Auges* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 65f.

But is there really such a universal religion? The answer is partly yes and partly no.

Partly yes, that is, if one defines religion as a personal belief in an "Ultimate Reality" and an esoteric experience of the divine which is universally accessible to anyone. Theoretically a universal religion exists as a loose religious group without fixed religious system of belief and organization like the "New Age Movement." The question however is until how long this movement will exist, since the criteria of its religious beliefs are based on esoteric experience, or primarily on feelings. When they no longer appeal to the followers, will there still be a "New Age Movement?" This is certainly an academic presumption which remains as such until the so-called new religions of today will pass the test of time.

Partly no, in the sense that a meeting of all religions for a broader ecumenical religious celebrations or prayers does not necessarily imply an assembly of a new religion, namely the universal religion. Ecumenical meetings normally take place on a social level, like demonstration of friendship and cooperation that is not usually an outcome of the emergence of a new universal religion.

The actual praxis of religious pluralism through a humanitarian way may indicate a positive sign that promotes common understanding among religions. Yet it is hard to assume that such concerns for social and political liberation implies commonality of belief, no matter how religiously motivated the concerns are. On matters of social and political concerns, religion does not normally take center stage. For the saying is true, "Doctrines divide, but service unites."

Thus in my opinion, a religion to be truly historical has to have a stable organization and a concrete system of religious claims, like dogma which have gained popular acceptance among its followers regardless of the amendments it undergoes in the course of its existence. Based on this criterion, the New Age Movement and other groups which aim at establishing a pluralistic or a uni-

versal religion no doubt cannot be qualified as one of the historical religion. If ever there is an attempt to push for the realization of such a phenomenon by the adoption of the philosophy of religious pluralism, it is still on its conceptual or on its embryo stage yet developing.

However the emergence of the pluralistic and universal religious movements poses a critique and a challenge to the facticity and relevance of every historical religion. In the light of the contemporary religious, social and political problems, the questions of faith and history, fact and meaning of every religion remain as indispensable questions. It follows that if each religion or religious group wants to be responsive and significant to modern questions, it cannot ignore the urgency of reevaluating its history and the direction of its religious claims for truth in the one and only powerful cause of human existence – GOD.

And, if each religion desires to be truly historical then it has to prove dialectically its historicity in view of its continuity in history and its existential relevance. It has to be willing to be criticized by others and to surrender its own religious arrogance if later its original positions and traditions are verified as rationally and theologically illogical. After all, a religious phenomenon develops as a product of human historical experiences and encounters with the visible and invisible elements of history, the natural and supernatural, the intelligible and the mysterious, and the revealed and the hidden.