Review Article

SMEARING CHRISTIANITY WITH AN EXCLUSIVIST PAINTBRUSH: THE HICK-D' COSTA DEBATE ON RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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Abstract

This essay attempts to address some of the central differences and similarities in the debate between Gavin D'Costa (Catholic) and John Hick (Protestant) about the nature and legitimacy of modern religious pluralism in the light of their own real-life religious, philosophical, social, and cultural differences. Given that it is a debate at advanced academic levels between two top scholars in religious studies which assumes a great deal of prior academic knowledge, our understanding of the key features of this controversy must first be well-situated within an extended discussion of clearly defined operational terms such as pluralism, religious pluralism, relativism, inclusivism, syncretism, and ecumenism. The essay then provides a brief review of the historical origins of the debate, followed by an outline of the general Catholic and Protestant views on religious pluralism which infuse the debate. This essential background information is followed by an assessment of some of the main weaknesses and strengths of each point of view although critical commentaries are also offered where appropriate throughout the essay. The concluding remarks suggest that the D' Costa position appears to contain greater legitimacy and validity from a strict biblical point of view, although it is not without its own weaknesses.

Keywords: Pluralism, Religious pluralism, Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Syncretism, Religious toleration, Relativism, Ecumenism, Catholic, Protestant.

INTRODUCTION

Before we can even begin to understand the nature of this scholarly debate, its intimate relationship to American cultural developments, and its pivotal influence upon the nature and direction of religious debate in academia generally, there are a few subjects or topics that need to be briefly addressed. Since the notion of 'religious pluralism' differs substantially between one religion and another as well as between different cultures and historical periods, any discussion about it needs to be securely placed within an understandable historical context. In this way, the D'Costa – Hick controversy can be better understood in terms of its relation to historical developments.

At the same time, the debate itself is academic in nature encompassing ideas and concepts that are profoundly philosophical touching a wide range of specialized fields of study such as epistemology, linguistics, religion, history, culture, political theory, economics, and a whole lot more. Since it is a debate at advanced academic levels between two top scholars in religious studies, it assumes a great deal of prior academic knowledge. Therefore, considerable time needs to be devoted to explicating the meaning of such terms where it is deemed important to do so. We need to situate our understanding within the framework of clearly defined operational terms. Although there are many such terms, some of the most essential ones featured in this debate whichneed to be elucidated are pluralism, religious pluralism, relativism, inclusivism, syncretism, ecumenism, religious toleration, and exclusivism, among a few others. In addition to addressing the historical context informing this debate and defining its central operational terms, there is a need to address the religious differences between these two academic scholars. Gavin D'Costa is Professor of Catholic Theology at the University of Bristol in Great Britain, and Head of the Department of

Theology and Religious Studies, with graduate training at Cambridge, while John Hicks was a Protestant philosopher of religion and theologian for most of his life (United Reformed Church) born in England, but who taught in the United States for most of his career. A key consideration here is that D'Costa teaching in Britain is subject mostly to British cultural influences, whereas Hick teaching mostly in America is subject to much stronger cultural influences than D'Costa especially relating to the foundational dominant trend of American political pluralism. In addition, Hicks participated heavily in many street-level community organizations in Britain directly involved in community relations attempting to integrate very large numbers of *non-Christian immigrants* into mainstream British society and culture such as Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. As well, Hicks was twice brought up for heresy charges even within his own religion for directly professing against the Westminster Confession of 1647 and against many core principles of the Christian faith itself as expressed in the Bible which, in turn, also brought him under investigation by the highly respected scholarly Cardinal and then Pope Joseph Ratzinger on numerous occasions. In terms of Protestant Confessional violations, a synod quickly voted against his membership into the presbytery. But the Protestants are not without their own political corruption practices, so the decision was appealed and barely reversed one year later. No matter, because the real American cultural story was that Hicks was sooner than later roundly celebrated and endorsed by the American Atheistic Association. By contrast, D'Costa has never been the subject of any questionable inquiries by Catholic or any other religious authorities. Being an orthodox Catholic Christian from Kenya, this should not be surprising at all. As far as what is known, D'Costa's community involvement remained at the administrative level of committee leadership advising Catholic religious communities on how best to settle the local problems of parishes including serious local problems caused by the strong influx of non-Christian

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immigrants into their communities. Another important point to remember in this debate is that Gavin D'Costa studied under John Hick when he was a theologian teaching at the University of Birmingham. In other words, there are previous personal factors infusing this debate largely unknown to outsiders. So, then, indeed there were real-life experiential and cultural differences between these two scholars in addition to doctrinal differences between Catholicism and Protestantism infusing this debate from the start. Consequently, a few words need to be said about the differences (and similarities) between the general Catholic and Protestant views on 'religious pluralism' that infuse this debate. But what needs to be done first is to discuss the definitional and conceptual parameters within which debates about the nature of religious pluralism are couched, followed by a brief review of its main historical origins. Having accomplished this task, perhaps we will be in a propitious position to assess some of the main weaknesses and strengths of each point of view in this debate, and then render some kind of judgment as which side of the debate seems more palatable in broad terms.

Religious Pluralism: Definitions and Parameters

The first point that needs to be emphasized at the start is that religious pluralism does not refer to simply 'tolerating' other religions, what is known as 'religious toleration'. An official legal and political policy of toleration might provide protection for religious minorities against physical punishments and financial exploitation, for example, but not from day-to-day, on-the-street, face-to-face prejudices and institutional exclusion from in the occupational marketplace or government positions or university attendance or even military positions. In other words, religious toleration simply means no persecution but not necessarily no discrimination (Beneke, 2006). However, when religious toleration is replaced by 'religious liberty', as it was in the early American cultural context, then a foundational legal, political and cultural environment is established for the eventual emergence and development of shared conceptions of how different religious groups should interact with each other, even making possible the existence and development of large numbers of different religious communities. Without the legal, political, and cultural preconditions, it becomes nearly impossible for different religious groups to practice their beliefs in a free, safe, and open manner. Therefore, defining religious pluralism as the active and genuine respect for the religious beliefs of 'other than' dominant religions is probably the best way to operationally define the concept of 'religious pluralism' *(1)*(Silk, 2007). So, then, in the modern sense of the expression, religious pluralism entails the freedom to freely practice one's religious beliefs without fear of persecution or discrimination in a safe, secure, tolerant, legal, and politically supportive cultural environment. Whether or not this kind of 'political' liberty (Westphal, 1999) actually operates in practice to sustain and strengthen long-term growth of the Christian faith in any culture is quite another issue, let alone the modern culture of any nation including America itself, the so-called home of religious liberty. The painful throes of America's present fervent cultural trend of de-Christianization following in Europe's footsteps would seem to suggest that this type of political pluralism is anything but a spiritual friend of Christianity. So, then, there is a much broader and more comprehensive global view that must also be applied to reach an adequate understanding of religious pluralism. In other words, it's not just a 'scholarly' debate or a friendly debate

between academics. When examined from a secular point of view, religious liberty or freedom of religion can be reduced to engaging in religious practices in accordance with the law in any particular geographical setting. But if it is perceived solely in this manner, then the belief content of these religious practices and traditions fail to receive adequate critical attention. Among many other things, different religions teach different things about human nature, the universe, human existence, society, the environment, and the relationship between these. Different religions make different kinds of claims about what is and what is not 'truth'.

Exclusivist religions, for example, proclaim only one path to truth and salvation, a central feature of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Many times, such religious beliefs have been used in the past to suppress other religious beliefs, but there is nothing inherent in one-truth religions that automatically leads to violent suppression against the adherents of different religious beliefs. Yes, there are some exclusivist religious beliefs that could be used to justify violent political oppression and persecution of others for practicing other-than-dominant religious beliefs in any particular culture. More often times than not, however, this tends to happen when the political and legal supportive framework for religious liberty is absent, making cultural suppression of different religious beliefs and practices much more likely than would otherwise be the case (Race, 1983). Even when that supportive framework exists, interreligious conflict within a particular culture may still occur even at increased levels of intensity and frequency. Differences between members of a society or culture often end up dividing them against each other within the many different spaces of everyday cultural life, while similarities between them often unite them as a relatively peaceful collective of shared beliefs, practices, thoughts, and behaviors. Differences divide, and similarities unite, it appears to be in most instances (Markham, 1993).

In history, many times the bickering between different Protestant sects initiated by Luther's protests was sometimes much more intense than the bickering between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, even though some Protestant sects bitterly attacked the Catholic pope for being the 'whole of Babylon'. On the other hand, some fundamentalist and evangelical Christians actively teach that many non-Christian religious practices are the sinful, pernicious work of the Devil, like witchcraft, Paganism, sorcery, and idolatry. For example, the Confucianist ancestor worship and reverence for the dead would be considered by most Biblical Christians as a form of Paganistic idolatry. Contemporary extremist religious regimes like the Afghan Taliban is another example of how exclusivist religious truth claims can be used to promote extreme forms of violent suppression against adherents of different religious belief systems. On the other hand, exclusivist religions also have a long history of promoting brotherhood between men, peace, justice, stable family life, education, and even economic development. For example, since first landing here in the latter part of the 16th century, both Protestant and Catholic missionaries have long been directly engaged in helping Taiwan to develop educational, medical, and other cultural facilities and promoting peace and love as a central part of their missionary work, often times at the expense of their lives. They have worked hard to systematize and institutionalize peaceful ways of relating to each other and to other religious faiths. They have worked hard up to the present day to help the poor and to develop means of reducing poverty and to right all

manner of social injustices in the support for human rights, solidarity, and peace. So, again, even in the so-called exclusivist religions, there is no automatic causal relationship between exclusivist truth claims and religious persecution when, historically speaking, the causal arrow has often times gone in the opposite direction, and often still goes in the opposite direction even in contemporary times. That having been said, bestowing one particular religion or denomination of that religion access to special privileges or rights that are denied to other religious adherents in concrete material existence (as Britain did with Lutheranism and the Puritans did in the early American colonial period) can operate to weaken social solidarity by decreasing human rights and increasing social and interreligious conflict (2).

However, even under conditions of religious pluralism such economic and political discrimination can operate in practice to weaken rather than strengthen religious pluralism. When the members of any society or culture don't have equal access to the economic, political, and cultural means to achieve a decent standard of material well-being solely or mainly because their differing religious beliefs and practices are held against them, then raw human conflict between people is highly likely to occur sooner or later, as it is founded upon bitterness and resentment at the ground level of everyday life. Examples in history abound from the Church of England's forceful political installment of Lutheranism to Japan's imposition of Shintoism as national religion to modern Islamic countries criminalizing the act of leaving the Muslim religion for anyone born in an Islamic family. Another theoretical approach to understanding the relationship between different religions is *inclusivism*. This approach basically claims that many different systems of religious beliefs are true rather than asserting that there is only one part to the truth and all others constitute error. Unlike exclusivist religious traditions, however, inclusivism can be viewed as a particular type of religious pluralism. Although it traditionally asserts that a religious adherent's personal beliefs are true only in their own particular context, the beliefs of other religious adherents are also valid in their own contexts. This is philosophically built on the assumption that all human beingshave at least partial access to absolute truth. Religious beliefs in ancient Greece, the Bahai Faith, Hinduism, and Christianity have all been interpreted in one form or another as being amenable to inclusivism.

In Christianity, many quotes from the Bible have been employed to support both the exclusivist and inclusivist theoretical positions (Matt 5:3-10/12:30/2:1-13/25:31-46; 2 Pet 3:9; John 1:9/3:16-17; Titus 2:11; Romans 2:14/5:18; Ps 19; Gen 14-18; Acts 10:1-48/17:23-28; James 1:27; Luke 10:25-37; and several more). As a doctrine, inclusivism is the official position of the Roman Catholic Church and Seventh-Day Adventists who still believe that Christianity is the only one true faith, but also believe that other religious faiths are at least partially true but not equally as in religious pluralism. Other faiths are viewed as 'partially true' in the sense that they may be valid ways of attaining salvation, but only until the Bible can be taught to them after which they can become 'included' into the universal Christian family. In this specific sense, inclusivism has been criticized as simply a mild version of extreme religious exclusivism. Some well-known Christian adherents of theological inclusivism have been C.S. Lewis, Karl Rahner, John Wesley, and even the great faithful American evangelist preacher himself, Billy Graham. Everybody thinks Graham believed only in salvation through

Christ alone, even most American Christians. It is less well-known that in the latter part of his life he made several highly-charged religious statements in the course of mass media interviews that were anything but exclusivist. For example, in one interview he proclaimed: "I believe that there are other ways of recognizing the existence of God – through nature, for instance – and plenty of other opportunities, therefore, of saying 'yes' to God" (Beam, 1978). In the theological debate over whether Christianity is primarily or fully inclusivist or exclusivist, ideology plays a crucial role. An agnostic pluralist or even an atheist can always cherry-pick Biblical passages to launch a rational attack upon Christian values and principles to support their own ideological agenda. For example, if we look at the Jesus saying in John 14:6, we can clearly see how the personal ideology of the reader can color interpretation. In this passage, Jesus says: "No one comes to the Father except through Me". If we interpret this passage to mean that salvation comes only through deliberate, intentional, conscious faith in Jesus Christ, then it seems to contradict the inclusivist position and appears superficially to be exclusivist.

On the other hand, if you interpret it to mean that Jesus Christ alone is solely responsible for making salvation possible for humanity which He established through His crucifixion, death, and resurrection, then another inclusivist conclusion becomes possible. That is, it becomes possible that some people may be permitted to come to the Father through this salvation but without knowing its intimate relation to Jesus at all. I need not point out which interpretation would be more likely to be supported by agnostic pluralists or atheists. Clearly, agnostic pluralists and atheists, among others, would be much more likely to provide support for Biblical interpretations that advance the relativist philosophical assumptions contained in their own ideological position even though, strictly speaking, there may be absolutely nothing relativist in nature at all about God's Laws as specified in the Holy Bible, otherwise what is the point of calling them "laws"? (Runzo, 1988; Sagi, 1999)

Therefore, debates within the theology of religious pluralism are always infused by debates over the nature of moral laws in relativist philosophy. ***Relativism***, better known as the philosophy of moral relativism, is a body of philosophical ideas which claims that there are no 'absolute' morallaws applicable to all people across all times and all places in the history of humanity (Schumacher, 2012). Within this view, personal and situational conditions and factors in concrete experience determine the correct moral position, not global absolute moral laws. As Nietzsche said himself when he defined the philosophy of relativism, which can basically be paraphrased as: 'You have your way, I have my way. As for the right way, it does not exist' (Nietzsche, 2018a, 2018b). Philosophers have noted the modern application of this moral philosophy to Darwinian evolutionary theory. The argument is basically that as humanity has evolved or 'progressed' to more 'advanced' biological forms (apes to …), so, too, moral and ethical standards have evolved or progressed with it. They have just evolved at different rates and in different ways in different places. Therefore, all that can ever be said is that there are no absolute or fixed moral laws; just progressive changes to different situationsnot static, unchanging moral laws. When applying this philosophy to the theology of religions, the argument becomes clear. The claim is that all religions are equally valid, and therefore no particular religion provides access to 'absolute' truth because there simply is no absolute truth. In this way, relativism can be viewed as an

extreme type of inclusivism in that all religious traditions can be 'included' into a relativist pluralist theological framework. Just how deeply the Hicks-D'Costa debate is irremediably informed by relativist philosophical assumptions will become clear later when we review its basic contents shortly. Another important concept that needs to be discussed in order to adequately understand the Hicks-D'Costa debate is *syncretism*. This concept can be generally defined as the combining of different systems of belief and schools of thought, involving the merging of many different mythologies or religious traditions. Through this assimilation, it is often claimed that there is an underlying unity to all religious faith systems. When two or more religious belief traditions merge or blend together in this way, it creates a new religious belief system. It tends to be a real concern for those individuals involved with interreligious dialogues due to their fears that they may absorb elements of the religious faith with which they are dialoguing and, therefore, betray their faith. Syncretism should not be confused with **ecumenism**, which is essentially the attempt by key representatives of a particular religious tradition to unite different offshoots and denominations of that same religious tradition with a common religious origin, for example, different Protestant sects talking to each other to bridge the religious gaps between each other and, therefore, forge a greater level of unity within the particular religious tradition, a process known as *intrareligious* ecumenism. When this is done at the level of between different religions, this is called **interreligious** dialogue.

A Brief History of Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism, like cultural pluralism, reaches far back into antiquity all the way up to contemporary expressions in post-modernism. Even modern philosophers (Troeltsch, 1996) noted in their major works that the earliest known proponents of religious pluralism, that is, bestowing the right of individuals to choose their own faith and to develop a personal relationship to it, were ancient Hinduism and Buddhism (Meister, 2010). Another ancient faith that took the same general approach to religious pluralism as Jainism, the ancient Indian religious tradition. After the French Revolution, the Enlightenment in Europe ignited monumental changes between religion and society by ushering into consideration greater freedom of thought, the separation of church and state, liberalism, secularization, civil and political rights, and democracy. Consequently, the increasing impact of the Enlightenment in Europe lead to steading increasing acceptance of religious pluralism. Notably, as the philosophy of religious pluralism rose in Europe, Christianity declined accordingly. In other words, pluralistic trends in Western thought and culture, especially since the 18th century, are connected to the decline of the Christian religious faith system in Europe, forcing it increasingly but steadily to adopt pluralism and philosophical relativism very much like the Asian religious traditions (Meister, 2010). Religion for the Romans was a part of everyday life since every home contained a household shrine where prayers to family deities were offered. As well, all over Roman cities were neighborhood shrines and sacred places, and more than 1/3rd of the year was devoted to religious observances (festivals, games, and the like) in which everybody participated, even slaves, women, and children. In these religious observances, the Romans paid homage to a great number of deities, some of which were adopted from the presence of Greeks on the Italian peninsula, like the cult of Apollo, for example.

The Romans usually didn't seek to destroy or suppress the gods of other peoples but, rather, they looked for common ground, even those they conquered. Since the 'mystery religions' imported from the Near East (parts of Egypt, Persia, and Mesopotamia) usually involved the taking of secret oaths and other secrecies, Romans tended to view them as conspiratorial and subversive activity which threatened the morality underlying Roman unity. Consequently, sometimes in early Roman history there were brutal suppression of these religions. However, the usual cultural and political policy of Roman rulers was to absorb the deities of other faiths rather than to destroy them since they believed this policy promoted social order and stability.

Religious Pluralism: Catholicism and Protestantism

In general, as described above, religious pluralism is more a type of attitude than it is a political theory, although it becomes a political theory especially when it is enshrined in a nation's constitution, as it is in several countries including the U.S. and Taiwan. This attitude which becomes policy at even the deep cultural levels of everyday life in a country relates to the diversity of religious belief traditions living side-by-side peacefully co-existing in society, It is a historical fact that in most if not all societies, different religious beliefs and practices living side-by-side in peaceful co-existence and harmony has been a pipe dream, to say the least. Yet extreme forms of religious pluralism claim that all religions can be true for some, but not true for others, OR that they are all equally true and valid, as we have seen earlier.

Most Christians, however, hold this belief to be logically and empirically untrue largely on the basis of the rational principle of contradiction. In logic, the law of contradiction is also known as the law of non-contradiction (LNC) or the principle of non-contradiction (PNC). This law of logic states that it is impossible for contradictory propositions to both be true in the same sense at the same time. That means that the proposition 'P is the case' cannot be true at the same time and in the same sense as the proposition 'P is not the case'; they are mutually exclusive propositions. This simple logic bears directly upon the debate about religious pluralism.

The two largest branches of the Christian faith, Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Of course, both Churches claims to be the 'one true Church' and that there is absolutely NO salvation outside of the one True Church, and this position is solidly based on a plethora of Biblical statements many of which emanate from Jesus' own lips. However, by contrast, Protestantism holds a different opinion which is no doctrine at all since it has many different denominations with no consistent unified views regarding religious pluralism. What it does have, in a word, are simply a variety of different positions about religious pluralism. However, there have been a large number of eminent, well-known Protestant theologians and scholars advancing the position that both truth value and salvific value can be found within other faith systems. For example, John Macquarrie, has been described in many notable sources as one of the most distinguished theologians of the 20th century. He argued that proselytizing should come to an end because "the truth of God has reached others through other channels" (Bradshaw, 1998, p. 168). Again, in another book where he reviewed the history and beliefs of the nine founders of major religious traditions (Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, etc.) each of which he

called "mediators" between divinity and humanity, he arrives at the exact same conclusion about God reaching other faiths through other channels. In the same vein, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints also argues that there is at least partial truth in almost all religious traditions (Macquarrie, 1996).

The traditional or classical Christian views towards religious pluralism are relatively straightforward. Before the great division occurred between the Eastern and Western Christian churches, orthodox Christianity held itself to be 'the one holy catholic and apostolic church', as mentioned in the Nicene Creed. In fact, the Roman Catholic Church, mainstream Christians, Episcopalians, and most of the Protestant denominations still hold on to this belief to this day, at least in public. Moreover, the Catholic Church makes the confident assertion that only itself is the 'one and only true Church' that was founded by Christ Himself in His lifetime, an assertion that is also claimed by both the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Following the Great Schism or separation of Eastern Church from the Western Church, the unity of the Western Church was shattered. Differences of opinion on theological issues became much more pronounced. For example, the Roman Catholic Church views the Orthodox sacraments as legitimate but without canonical authority.By contrast, the Eastern Orthodox Church does not apply the concept of 'validity' to the Sacraments, but it accepts the administering of the Roman Catholic Sacramentsas legitimate or valid. Both continue to regard each other as 'Christian', although suffering from the schism.

Modern Christian views about religious pluralism differ from classical or traditional Christian views in important regards. Some Protestant religious denominations believe that only adherents who believe in certain fundamental doctrines can know the true path to salvation. The central belief behind this notion is that Jesus Christ was sinless and perfect as the Son of God, and that He died and rose again as payment for the wrongful behavior of those who accept the salvific offer.They also continue to believe in the 'one true Church', but that church is an invisible church consisting of many different times of Christians as different sects or denomination.

There are a few evangelical Protestants that remain highly doubtful about the possibility of any Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox adherents joining the membership of this 'invisible church'. Usually, they firmly and flatly reject the religious so-called 'restorationist' movementsof the 19th century such as Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Science, which they view as not really Christian anyway. By contrast, the Catholic Church holds a firm position of developmental theology. That is to say, the "Holy Spirit" works in and through the complexities of concrete material human history to bring the Church closer and closer to a 'mature' understanding of the salvific truths imparted originally by Jesus Christ Himself to the Apostles, saving truths that cannot be altered nor added to. For example, first the Church comes to realize baptism as a desire, then later realizes it should be extended to non-Christians. So, then, different types of what is called 'implicit faith' come to hold sway since many people strive to live a 'good' life but have not yet arrived at a true knowledge of God. Then the Second Vatican Council comes along officially affirming the goodness found in non-Christian faiths, and addressing them with respect and appreciation accordingly. Suddenly, official papal documents start imploring all Christians to recognize that the Holy Spirit also works outside of the Christianchurch, not just within it. This is based on the belief that God alone sends the gift of grace, no one else.

John Hick's Hypothesis of Religious Pluralism

Now that we have provided some of the essential background knowledge for a suitable minimal understanding of the central issues involved in the Hick-D'Costa debate on religious pluralism, we are in a propitious position to see how they infuse that particular debate. Of course, we have to keep in mind here that Hick was one of D'Costa's major course professors at the University of Birmingham during the time that D'Costa studied as a student there. By D'Costa's own admission during an interview, there wasn't much love lost between Birmingham's students and Professor Hicks, including D'Costa himself.

The philosophical grounding for Hick's view of religious pluralism is fully developed in his massive masterpiece, An Interpretation of Religion (2004), chalk-filled with brilliant insights and analyses on the nature of religion in modern societies, among other things. At the very beginning of that book, he provides the justification for that notorious pluralistic view of religion that he is so well-known for. In his discussion about the relationship between religion and the world, he states categorically that the worlditself is "religiously ambiguous". Therefore, the concept of religious ambiguity is the foundation of Hick's philosophy of religious pluralism. That means that it can be interpreted in all or part of its aspects as essentially religious or non-religious

Most philosophers of religion know that Hick first introduced the notion of "religious ambiguity" in his previous book titled, Faith and Knowledge (1966). At that time, however, Hick applied the concept only to interpretative differences between theistic and atheistic views of the world (le. cosmologies). At that point, he wasn't interested to draw out the fuller implications of the concept and apply them to religious p0pluralism. However, the concepts that he developed in Faith and Knowledge subsequently became the foundation for his religious pluralist hypothesis, concepts like 'experiencing as' and 'religious interpretation' later become the foundation for his book consisting of his interpretation of religion (Hick, 2004).

In that book, he first argues that the world presents itself to human beings as sufficiently ambiguous as to permit it to be "interpreted" religiously in many different ways. But this time he goes way beyond the proposition of "ambiguity" to claim that there is parity or equal validity among the world's major religions ethical and soteriological content and efficiency. He says that as far as can be determined from human observation, no particular religion stands out above and beyond the rest in is transformational function or efficacy. That is, all religious belief systems possess the capacity to transform the lives of human beings. Further, he asserts, no particular religious tradition can claim to be the only authentic true religious experience. Basically, these claims represent Hick's epistemological justification for religious experience. In order to accept this epistemological justification, however, we have to be willing to lend the same epistemological justification to all those social groups who form their own very different religious beliefs on the fundamental basis of their own

religious experiences. Each world faith tradition, therefore, is viewed within this cosmological viewpoint as an independent, culturally conditioned, and largely reflexive way of experiencing what he calls 'Ultimate Reality'. Therefore, he states, all of these other-than-Christian world faiths are also simply just "alternative soteriological 'spaces' within which, or ways along which, men and women can find salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfillment" (Hick, 2004, p. 240). By contrast, the Kenyan Catholic Theologian who studied under John Hick for a while at the University of Birmingham in his young student days took a rather circuitous route to establishing his counter-position on Hick's religious pluralism by first favoring it. In his first book titled, Theology and Religious Pluralism, he followed Alan Race's lead and applied his exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism model to other religious traditions, not only to Christianity. He argued that all of these other religious traditions would be eventually "fulfilled" in Christianity. Even if it hadn't happened yet, it would occur inevitably.

In this book, D'Costa critically examined the key ideas of the representative proponents of each of Race's threefold typology: John Hick representing the pluralist perspective; Karl Rahner as inclusivist; and Hendrik Kraemer as the exclusivist proponent. Here D'Costa firmly defends Rahner's inclusivism which advanced the notion of the universal love of God for all humanity and salvation through Christ only. Pluralism and exclusivism would only be fulfilled in Christianity and through God's grace. Again, for D'Costa all grace comes from and ends in Christ, and the Church is the sacrament handed down by Christ himself to the world.

Further, D'Costa here had lots of weaknesses to discuss about pluralism as a philosophy and in particular John Hick's approach to pluralism which were much more elaborated in D'Costa's second book titled, John Hick's Theology of Religions. There, he argued vehemently that Hick's argument that all religious faith systems inevitably lead to the same divine reality was extremely problematic, to say the least. There were at least three major defects that he could identify. First and foremost, it went directly against the traditional claims of mainstream Christian theology, so it could never be acceptable to adherents of Orthodox Christianity.

Second, Hick's claim that there are many paths to God could only be maintained through the re-interpretation and reconstruction of all religious faith systems. In effect, D'Costa claimed, Hicks is requiring all religious faiths to comply with his demand that they completely forsake 'one-true-religion' beliefs. Thirdly, and perhaps most philosophically devastating of all, D'Costa argued that Hick's pluralistic model was internally illogical or logically incoherent because it privileges its own position on 'the truth' as the highest position. That is to say, while claiming pluralism for all other religious faiths, it advances its own claims to truth as exclusivist by excluding all other claims to truth. In fact, D'Costa argues, Hicks continually makes statements which indicate that he feels his own view of religion is more true than other religions.

Hicks responded to the claims in that book by editing a book with Paul Knitter, and then several scholars produced pro-pluralist works (Knitter, 2005, 1985; Coward, 1990; Cobb, 1999; and more). The title of that book says it all in terms of how John Hick and Paul Knitter feel about Christianity: The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology

of Religions. However, not to be outdone by one his former illustrious teachers, D'Costa subsequently edited an alternative collection of essays entitled, you guessed it, Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions. By 2000, D'Costa has apparently shiftedmore towards the exclusivist side of the theological debate.

In his book, The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity, finally he boldly proclaims that there is no such theological position as pluralism, properly speaking. Pluralism is simply a masked or deceptive type of exclusivism as expressed religiously or as a form of modernity. Therefore, D'Costa claims, the so-called 'pluralism' of Hick, Knitter, and the like are simply modern positions that advocate all religions are equally valid when, in fact, they either contain explicitly exclusivist religious features (like the Dalia Lama claiming that one cannot achieve true liberation without first becoming a De Lug Buddhist monk) OR secular features (such as applying an ethical rule that judges all religions in the same way).

Instead of going in the Hick pluralistic theological direction, D'Costa prefers to adopt and defend a 'trinitarian' perspective on other religious faiths. This theological approach absolutely refuses to recognize them as equally valid or temporary, less-advanced kinds of revelationor paths to salvation. On the other hand, D'Costa is ready to concede that God's grade is operational within these alternative faith traditions if only in a partial or fragmentary manner. To support this view, he analyzes several documents of the Roman Catholic Church, concluding that his position is the one that best serves the theological goals of equality, mutual respect, and toleration among and between different religious traditions, NOT pluralism, nor indeed the inclusivism of his previous position.

Concluding Remarks

Arguing strictly from WITHIN a Christian theological perspective, a few general comments can be made regarding the modern theology of religions as expressed in the Hick-D'Costa debate on religious pluralism. The exclusivist model is the only tenable position to hold in order to remain logically consistent within the bounds of authentic Biblical theology. Otherwise, the absolute moral standards of God's Laws are relativized to situational conditions and factors that vary from culture to culture. The threefold race model of exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism tends to falsely impose upon religious traditions many features that can be better understood as abstract features of a typology rather than reflective of concrete reality in every instance. For example, many aspects within the Christian faith system can be viewed as inclusivist, while many others can also be persuasively argued as pluralist. So, then, what's the point of smearing all of it with an 'exclusivist' paintbrush?

Secondly, we also need to re-examine and re-evaluate prevailing notions in modern society as to what exactly constitutes a 'religion'. Why? One reason is because highly liberal, secular scholars are hard at work constantly trying to revise and reconstruct definitional parameters to suit their long-term ideological agendas. Luther himself, following statements made by Jesus several places in the Gospels, specifically warned against the corrupting influence of scholars upon the Christian faith. The point is that our understanding of 'religion' today is at least partly but significantly a liberal narrative offered to us by modern scholars not exactly

antagonistic to philosophical pluralism in general nor religious pluralism in particular. Modern definitions of religion tend to serve a rhetorical function in supporting the continued privatization of religion, reducing religion to a set of cultic ritual activities all of which are equally valid. In some modern countries, this process has occurred at a much faster rate than in other countries, like in America where pluralism of everything is worshipped fervently at the cultural altar. We have to question the strong cultural impulse to reduce religion to strictly worldly affairs by making it serve primarily worldly functions.

In trying to treat religion as just another product on the shelf among so many other products, somewhere in the mix we seem to lose the sacred dimensions of it. Then it becomes totally secularized in the process of becoming just another material product like a TV, refrigerator, or car. At least from within biblical Christianity, religious beliefs are much more than just accessories to modern life. So, to a considerable extent, D'Costa is surely correct to argue that Hick's view of pluralism accommodates the modern cultural trends of relativism and secularism just a little too much.

On the other hand, some of Hick's criticisms of D'Costa's position ring a bell of at least partial legitimacy. He asserts that D'Costa's claim that pluralism is just a deceptive form of exclusivism fails to fully deal with the substantive differences contained within the pluralist position. D'Costa also fails to recognize the speculative, exploratory nature of his pluralist philosophical position on religious pluralism, mistaking pluralism for a religion instead of a philosophy, although this is perhaps a weaker counter-argument on Hick's part. Perhaps one of Hick's greatest drawbacks is the almost complete lack of methodological reflexivity. At no point in his work on religion does he stop to consider the possible impact of any powerful cultural influences upon his philosophical and religious thought. At no point does he stop to consider himself as a mouthpiece for long-established cultural trends promoting secularism, relativism, and even the de-Christianization of culture, in total revulsion of values and principles set down in the Christian Bible. His position seems to be quite the opposite in that he champions the very processes that continue to secularize and de-Christianize culture even to the point of his own direct political involvement.The impression gained from reading Hicks is that he finds these pernicious cultural trends as perfectly acceptable, whereas D'Costa is the guard who stands at the gate of authentic biblical Christianity ever so vigilant and ever so ready to identify and neutralize any corrupting influences of culture upon the sacred Scriptures.

Endnotes

- However, it needs to be borne in mind here that religious pluralism defined as a relatively free-for-all religious liberty established for the practical secular purposes of political expediency and electoral benefits, that is, the putting into practice of any set of religious beliefs simply on the basis of the principle of plurality itself in order to promote social order, is not necessarily putting them into practice on the basis of communally-shared biblical principles. To this day, this is still a matter being hotly debated in many religious, political, and academic circles around the world as they examine the intimate relationship between modernism, secularism, relativism, and pluralism and their varied impact and influence upon different systems of religious belief.

- Of course, one could make the very same logical argument against religious pluralism. That is to say, it certainly is logically possible to assume that in many cases both historically and in contemporary periods, a greater amount of different religious belief systems and practices existing within a politically-defined territory can exacerbate greater rather than lesser social conflict within that geographical area. In other words, it would be rather philosophically naïve and historically blind simply to believe to believe that social conflict or even interreligious conflict would cease to exist if only religious pluralism was allowed free reign. What previously occurred in Europe after the Reformation to present times with the emaciation of European political and cultural unity, as well as what is occurring at the present time with the imminent destruction of American political and cultural unity, are certainly cases in point.

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