THE QUEST FOR OBJECTIVITY:
RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND RELIGIOUS PLURALITY IN MALAYSIA[1]

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There have been many definitions to religious pluralism and religious plurality topped them. In many instances the two terms have been regarded as synonymous and used inter-changeably. This paperwork tries to provide an objective comparison between the two terms grounded on textual and contextual evidences. In depth interviews with several religious leaders in Malaysia have been conducted to further examine the intensity dan the details of the use of the two terms. The comparison is important to shed some light on the conflict arising from the word religious pluralism. In addition, it is hoped that the comparison would bring some clarifications on the origin of religious pluralism and the pregnant meanings it has for the sake of objectivity.

Introduction

In 1985 John Hick published *Problems of Religious Pluralism* which altogether concretized the ideas he had been developing in his earlier publications entitled *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973) and *God Has Many Names* (1980). In 1985, he published *An Interpretation of Religion*, a series of Gifford lectures that offered a Christian interpretation (or reinterpretation) of religion and the religions.[2] Hick, was deeply inspired by Wilfred Cantwell Smith ardent criticism on Christianity as the one and only true faith. He was also moved by Kantian epistemology that helped him to differentiate between what the Ultimate as The Real in itself to that of the real as percieved by man. Hick, was a trained and learned theologian, who later on confronted the fundamentals that he learnt in Christian theology. Religious pluralism is indeed, a philosophy coined by him that challenge the Catholic traditional understanding of *extra ecclessiam nullas salus* and the Protestant five *solas*.

Given this background, we now shift our focus to another setting, which is Malaysia, that has been recently stirred by the pros and cons debate of religious pluralism. It is interesting to note that the term religious pluralism did not officially capture the academia until year 2000. A quick survey on Malaysian Thesis Online, a database for academic thesis and dissertation written in Malaysia since 1960, revealed that there are only three post-graduate research titles explicitly on religious pluralism recorded in 2005. It is therefore assumed that the discourse of religious pluralism could have been surfaced as early as in year 2000 if the online report can be taken as valid indicator.

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[1] The paper is presented at Roundtable Seminar on Religious Pluralism by the Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, on 30th January 2015.

[2] John Hick, John Hick: An Autobiography, Oxford:Oneworld Publication, 2002 p. 84.

It is interesting however to note that religious pluralism has generated public and academic debates in Malaysia following Anwar Ibrahim's speech titled "Religion and Pluralism in a Divided World" at the London School of Economics (LSE) on 18 March 2010. Anwar was interpreted as propagating a philosophy deemed sensitive to the majority Muslims'in Malaysia. In his speech he spoke the following;

> Today, <u>freedom of religion without which there can be no religious pluralism</u>, is an entrenched constitutional liberty in the established democracies. As such, favoring one religion over another or granting it a position at the expense of others may be considered as being against the spirit of religious pluralism. Yet this still happens even in certain established democracies in Europe while in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia this ambivalence has been virtually taken for granted until recently. This is why the discourse on religious pluralism must deal with the fundamental question of freedom of religion and by association the freedom of conscience. The question arises as to whether it is the diversity of religions which makes the divided world more divided or the denial of religious freedom that causes it. <u>I believe I'm not alone in saying that for religious pluralism to flourish in a divided world, it is morally unacceptable to say to people of other faiths: We believe in our God and we believe we are right; you believe in your God, but what you believe in is wrong. If the Qur'anic proclamation that there is no compulsion in religion is to mean anything then it must surely be that imposition of one's faith unto others is not Islamic. But to say this is not to deny the reality of religious diversity for the Qur'an also tells us clearly:</u> "O people! Behold, we have created you from a male and a female and have made you into nations and tribes to that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all knowing.[3]

As a result of his speech, Anwar Ibrahim has recieved grave criticism particularly from Muslim NGOs in Malaysia. On the other hand, supporters of human right and freedom were all the way on his side. Academic discourses debating on the philosophy increased and politically motivated remarks were extended at the mainstream and electronic and social media either in support or against him.

It is interesting to closely examine the responses put forward by Malaysians towards his speech. However, this paper is much more interested to expose an important issue assumed to be the root of the trouble in Anwar Ibrahim's speech which; is the association of religious plurality with religious pluralism. As a matter of fact, Anwar Ibrahim is not the only person who is making such an association. In reality there are also academics and researchers, globally and locally who share such a conviction. This paper therefore seeks to unravel them and to examine if such an association correspond with Hick's intended meaning of religious pluralism.

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[3] Public lecture by Anwar Ibrahim at the London School of Economics, March 18, 2010. http://islam1st.org/2012/08/religion-and-pluralism-in-divided-world.html

Hick, The Father Of Religious Pluralism

John Hick joined the Presbyterian Church and trained as minister at the Westminster college Cambridge. His was trained in traditional Christian theology. He went to Birmingham in 1967 and regarded Birmingham as the place that contributed a lot to the changing perspective he had in Christian theology. It was a Birmingham he became deeply involved in different races, religions and community relations work.[4] He had secured the oppurtunities to spend time at the synagogues, mosques, gurudwaras and temples. It was in Birmingham that he was overwhelmed by religious diversity noticed the thing they share in common.

> As I spent time in the mosques, synagogues, gurudwaras and temples as well as churches something very important dawned on me. On the one hand all the externals were different. In a Hindu temple, for example, the sights, the sounds, the smells, the colours were those of India and I could imagine myself (after I had been in India) back there. And not only the externals, but also the languages, the concepts, the scriptures, the traditions are all different and distinctive. But at a deeper level it seemed evident to me that essentially the same thing was going on in all these different places of worship, namely men and women were coming together under the auspices of some ancient, highly developed tradition which enables them to open their minds and hearts 'upwards' towards a higher divine reality which makes a claim on the living of their lives. They are called, in the words of a Hebrew prophet, 'to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before their God'. At this basic level the religions are at one. In my favourite words of the Sufi Jalaluldin Rumi, 'The lamps are different, but the Light is the same: it comes from Beyond.'

It was against the backdrop of religious exclusivism of traditional Christian theology as well as racism that Hick developed his personal faith in religious pluralism. He challenged the traditional idea of exclusive truth held in Christianity and insist on the reinterpretation of Incarnation for he thought this is the root of exclusivism of Christianity. He asserted that Incarnation should be understood as a symbolical or metaphorical or mythic rather than a literal truth."[5] This has brought him and a number of his friends to publish chapters in a book entitled The Myth of God Incarnate in 1977. The work received furious responses from the British churches that to some extent it was considered heretical.[6] Later in 1993 he authored another book entitled The Metaphore of God Incarnate.

> I came fairly soon to see that for Christianity the problem of religious plurality hinged on the central doctrine of the incarnation. If Jesus was God incarnate, Christianity alone among the world religions was founded by God in person and

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[4] He was later on instrumental in establishing Birmingam Inter-Faith Council and was elected the first chairman in 1975. He was also an active member of All faith for One Race AFFOR

[5] John Hick, *Problems Of Religious Pluralism*. p.11.

[6] For a full account on the controversial issue of the work, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, refer to Hick, *Problem of Religious Pluralism,* p. 11-15.

must therefore be uniquely superior to all others. This made me look again at the traditional doctrine and its history.[7]

Hick central ideas of religious pluralism refers to a transformation process. It is a transformation from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness, and within the context of all great religious traditions from religion-centeredness to god-centeredness. Hick percieves that one's religion depends very much on his birthplace. And God is very much the affair of human interpretation influenced by culture and man inherited tradition. Due to this Hick believed that ways of salvation is the business of interpretation and that there is not merely one way but a plurality of ways of salvation.[8]

In order to justify the universality of his ideas of religious pluralism, Hick claimed that his philosophy is aspired by the utterances of Muslim Sufis such as 'the lamps are different the light is the same, it comes from beyond" of Jalaluddin al-Rumi.[9] In fact, Hick has acknowledged a few Muslim Sufis of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries, for example Muhy al-Dán Ibn ʿArabi, and *al-Junayd al-Baghdādi,* who taught that the divine light is refracted through many human lenses.[10] Hick also referred to Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and Evelyn Underhill, accentuating their mystical experiences in encountering the transcendent god.[11] For example, Meister Eckhart said "when the divine light pours into the soul, the soul is united with God, as light blends with light."[12]

In the face of Hick's claims, it is essential to acknowledge that religious pluralism is a philosophy that arises from within Christian theology namely exclusive theology. Originally, Hick formulated religious pluralism to help him to understand the many truth-claim exhibits by religions. It is important to note that religious pluralism does not simply offer acceptance to plurality of religions. Religious pluralism involves in leveling the Truth in all religions for every religion represents different path to the same Truth (the Real an-sich).

Religious Pluralism and Religious Plurality.

It is crucial to differentiate between religious pluralism and religious plurality. The former is a new theology, some regarded it as a liberation theology, a philosophy, heavy-loaded in meaning and historical background. Religious plurality on the other hand is a description of a phenomenon, which is the existence of many religions. The diversity is part of nature and like many other creations, diversity has always instill in man the feeling of awe and admiration. Religious pluralism however goes beyond the admiration for religious plurality. Religious pluralism seeks to justify the why and how religious plurality surfaced. And for Hick,

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[7] Autobiography, P. 227

[8] John Hick, *Problems Of Religious Pluralism*, p. 34.

[9] R.A Nicholson, *Râmá: Poet and Mystic*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1950, p. 166. M.M.Gupta, (Trans.) *Maulana Râmá's Mathnāwá*, Agra: MG Publishers & Book, 1990, p. 90, John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion*, p. 145. *An Interpretation Of Religion,* p. 233, *The Rainbow of Faiths,* p. 37.

[10] John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths,* p. 36.

[11] Hick quoted few utterances that these Christian mystics unconsciously made during their deep spiritual meditation practices. For a review of such utterances, refers to Hick, *Disputed Question in Theology*, p. 25-28. See also *An Interpretation,* p. 292-294.

[12] *Ibid*, p. 26.

religious pluralism is an outcome of human responses to the Transcendent. The thing that matters in such responses is that it is single-handed and not mutual.

Nevertheless there has been similar interpretation on religious pluralism on the view that it refers to religious plurality. The Harvard project led by Diana L. Eck at Harvard University is one of the best example. Mohd Fauzi Yaacob in his article The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in Malaysia offered three definition of religious pluralism and he choose to accept the first two definition which alluding to the idea of religious heterogeneity and promotion of inter-faith dialogue.

Like many terms in the social sciences, the term "religious pluralism" has been used in many senses by its users. In its widest and most common usage, it has been defined as religious diversity or heterogeneity, which means a simple recognition of the fact that there are many different religious groups active in any given geo-political space under consideration and that there is a condition of harmonious co-existence between followers of different religions. The term has also been used to mean a form of ecumenism where individuals of different religions dialogue and learn from each other without attempting to convince each other of the correctness of their individual set of beliefs. The third sense in the use of the term is that pluralism means accepting the beliefs taught by religions other than one's own as valid, but not necessarily true. Its usage in the third sense often gives rise to one controversy or another. For the purpose of this paper, the term religious pluralism is used in the first and second senses, to mean the existence of religious heterogeneity and attempts at promoting understanding through inter-faith dialogues. Pluralism in the third sense calls for a totally different approach and methodology which is beyond the ken of the present writer.

There are also many other publications that inclined to interpreting religious pluralism as religious plurality for example Yeoh Seng Guan in *Managing sensitivities: Religious pluralism, civil society and inter-faith relations in Malaysia¹³* and *Actually Existing Religous Pluralism in Kuala Lumpur,*¹⁴ Rita Camilleri in Religious Pluralism in Malaysia: the Journey of Three Prime Ministers,¹⁵ Hashim Kamali in *Diversity and Pluralism in Quranic Perspective* ¹⁶ and most recently Osman Bakar in his recent publication *Islamic Civilization and the Modern World* and *Islam and the Challenge of Diversity and Pluralism: Must Islam Reform Itself?¹⁷*

A recently publication by Lewis E. Winkler entitled *Contemporary Muslim & Christian Responses to Religious Plurality, (2014)* acknowledge that Hick's view on religious pluralism has been popularized that there has been profileration in the pluralist persepectives. Winkler however choose to differentiate between religious plurality and religious pluralism and prefers the former "to avoid any confusion with Hick and other pluralists." He defines religious plurality as refering to the sociological reality of the presence of many major religious views (usually in close proximity) without necessarily evaluating this situation in any theological or philosophical manner.

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[13] The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs, Volume 94, Issue 382, 2005
[14] http://www.isa-sociology.org/publ/E-symposium/E-symposium-vol-1-3-2011/EBul-SengGuan-Dec2011.pdf

[15] *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations Volume 24, Issue 2, 2013*
[16] http://karamah.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Diversity-and-Pluralism1.pdf
[17] https://obbakar.wordpress.com/articles/journal-articles/islam-and-the-challenge-of-diversity-and-pluralism/

So far, this paper has tried to capture the overlapping interpretation between religious pluralism and religious plurality. The next discussion seeks to report the findings of in depth interview with 14 religious leaders in Malaysia, gathering their ideas on the meanings of familiarity and perceptions of religious pluralism

Religious Pluralism As Understood And Experienced By Religious Leaders In Malaysia

This paper reports some of the findings of a research that seeks to explore the understanding of religious pluralism in Malaysia. This report will highlight the following findings from the interview;

a) It is plain that almost every respondent regard it as referring to diversity of religions. There were two Christian respondents who were aware of its technical meaning. On the other hand, two Sikh respondents have no clue at all about it while another one holds to the meaning that every religion is the same as it teaches the belief in God.

b) The respondents held divided opinion about their familiarity with the philosophy. Some acknowledged that they knew it through formal education, some from readings, the Christians and the Sikhs thought that religious pluralism is found in their religious teaching while a Muslim respondent denied that he has any formal exposure on the philosophy.

c) The Buddhist respondents were pessimistic about the adoption of religious pluralism in Malaysia as they were unsure of the public acceptance. A Christian respondent believed that religious pluralism should be taken at its factual rather than technical meaning. The Muslim respondonts said that the adoption of the philosophy depending on its interpretation. He however, rejected the idea of equality of religions. Majority of the respondents did not agree that religious pluralism has been translated in the national agenda. The Buddhist respondent however thought that religious pluralism is reflected in the Federal Constitution. Another Buddhist and a Hindu respondent said that religious pluralism has not been translated in the national agenda as there are restrictions to non-Muslims to form their own religious society at tertiary education. A Christian respondent said there is inconsistency as there has been called for equality and yet there is also hegemony. The Muslim respondent viewed that the national agenda promoted unity and intergration rather than reliogus pluralism.

d) When confronted if reliogus pluralism will affect one's faith, it is found that the Buddhist and the Hindu respondents were the least offended for they took a liberal approach in accepting the philosophy. A Christian respondent rejected what he regarded as factual pluralism while accetping its general meaning. Another Christian respondent believes that religious pluralism has affect on one's fatith. He said that someone who believe in religious pluralism will have to change some of his beliefs. Another Christian respondent thougt that religious pluralism is problematic to one's faith. A Muslim respondent believes that if religious pluralism means diversity, it aspires for inter-religious engagement and will help to increase his faith in Islam.

e) The respondents were also asked about their acceptance to one of the teachings of religious pluralism that all religions are equal. Three of the Buddhist respondents

indicated that they have no problem in accepting the idea. A Hindu respondent thought the idea of equality is a manipulation and it has been wrongly interpreted. A Christian respondent said that equality in dignity should not be translated into equality of truth. On the other hand, another Christian respondent rejected the idea and claimed that it is wrong. The other Christian respondent claimed that even if we do not accept the idea of equal it does not mean we cannot relate with people from other religions. Two Sikh respondents however were positive with the idea while a Muslim respondent denied that equality means equality of the Ultimate.

f) The respondents were also asked if they thought that the idea of religious pluralism brings harm to the Federal Constitution. Almost all of them denied. A Muslim respondent said that the allegation has no basis since Islam is under the care of Sultan and religious instituion.

It is found that all the respondents except for two Christian respondents were not conversant with the philosophy of religious pluralism. With the exception of the two Christian respondents, all the respondents subscribe to the literal meaning of religious pluralism. This led them to uncertainty idea whether it can be adopted in Malaysia. They however accepted its literal meaning which is religious plurality. Most of the respondents did not have formal encounters with the term religious pluralism even though some claimed that it is imbued in their religious teachings. Having resorted to its literal meaning most of the respondents attempted to contextualise the philosophy. Therefore there were questions that raised certain issues in religious pluralism which were deemed controversial for example the issue of equality of religions. These issues were purposely highlighted to examine the respondents' understanding of the philosophy as well as to educate them about the philosophy.

CONCLUSION

The levelling of religious pluralism with religious plurality is disturbing as it ignores the epistemological, historical and theological aspects involved in the formulation of the former. It is quite understandable if the public fail to grasp the intricate backdrop behind the philosophy. Nevertheless the acceptance of people in the academia in condoning the exchange meanings of the two terms is disheartening. It is crucial that Hick's philosophy should not be taken out of context for the sake of objectivity and justice for his intellectual quest. If it is a matter of public confusion, rectifying measures can be made by means of explanation and education. However, the dispute and confusion reside within the academic circles. It requires one to be courageous and sincere for the Truth to maintain objectivity.