

A Sermon on Religious Pluralism

Sermon by Rev. Minister Angela Smith of COPE for February 6th, 2022 (and beyond)

Religious pluralism is a defensible position and, all things considered, the only defensible position when dealing with rights of peoples, cultures, and communities in regards to religious freedom. This sermon will begin with a look at some of John Hick's justifications for religious pluralism. This will be followed by objections raised by Alvin Plantinga in his defense of exclusivism and in the end I will rebut Plantinga by showing that he has misinterpreted, misunderstood, or contextually misused Hick's arguments to demonstrate the possible, but improbable, truth value of his assertions.

It is not difficult to justify religious pluralism. John Hick does an excellent job of highlighting many aspects of religious pluralism that lead to a richer spiritual life for individual believers and to a more peaceful world in which those of different cultures and faiths can co-exist mutually respecting the diverse and beautiful expressions of understanding and experiencing of the divine reality. Hick establishes a solid foundation and reasoning for why and how different faiths grew over time. He begins by stating, "Regional variations in our human ways of conceiving the divine have persisted through time into the developed world faiths that we know today."¹ He goes on to show that regional variations and instances of divine revelation were naturally and imperfectly interpreted by the various cultures based on their abilities to understand and communicate the divine reality of their experience.² He emphasizes this point by stating, "The ultimate divine reality is infinite and as such transcends the grasp of the human mind."³ Hick goes on to argue that all of the faiths have overlapping values of salvation and all provide a "principal path to the divine reality."⁴ In fact, he ends his argument with this, "For all these [religious paths] exist in time, as ways through time to eternity."⁵

Alvin Plantinga completely misrepresents the arguments of Hick in attempting to support his exclusivistic views. He begins by stating that,⁶

Pluralists...like John Hick...hold that such propositions as (1) and (2) and their colleagues from other faiths are literally false...This seems to me to be no advance at all with respect to the arrogance or egotism problem [supposedly inherent in exclusivism]; this is not a way out...If, in the case of those who believe (1) and (2), that is sufficient for intellectual arrogance of egotism, the same goes for those who believe their denials.

Plantinga claiming that for a Christian to believe in God the creator and that God's only begotten son Jesus died so all of humankind may have salvation (his premises 1 and 2, respectively) that Christian cannot respect or acknowledge that other people of other

¹ Pojman, Louis P., ed. *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*. 4th Edition. (Wadsworth, 2003). (p.500)

² Ibid. (p. 502)

³ Ibid. (p. 502)

⁴ Ibid. (p. 505)

⁵ Ibid. (p. 506)

⁶ Ibid. (p. 511)

cultures and faiths have an equally plausible and divine revelation in their respective faiths without admitting denial of their own beliefs. It is not clear at all that Hick requires a renunciation of any of the well-established world religions, including Christianity. In fact, later on I will show that he absolutely does not require any such renunciation in his arguments.

Plantinga goes on to state that Hick and other pluralists establish a reliability issue with any individual claiming certainty of truth in belief claims. Plantinga goes on to suggest that the mere possibility of having an exclusive relationship to the truth of the divine reality is sufficient for believing that one in fact does know the truth. Plantinga states:⁷

Many pluralists [including Hick] unite in declaring that, at any rate, the exclusivist certainly can't know that his exclusivistic views are true. But is this really true? I will argue briefly that it is not...What must be possible is that both the exclusivist is justified in believing (1) and/or (2) and they be true. Presumably, the pluralist does not mean to dispute the possibility.

Plantinga's argument here is utterly absurd. In fact, his statements regarding Hick's positions are complete nonsense as they do not even recognize the main point Hick makes regarding the truth value of all the major world religions. In no way does Hick deny the truth value of Christian belief, nor does he deny the truth value of any of the fundamental beliefs of all the major world religions. Plantinga seems to be playing "cute" and not to be seriously considering the positions laid out by Hick at all. Plantinga misuses and misinterprets Hick's arguments in order to frustrate those who would argue in favor of Hick or in opposition to exclusivism. In fact, Hick states, "The probability that we have seriously to consider is that many different accounts of the divine reality may be true, though all expressed in imperfect human analogies."⁸ This statement is absolutely reasonable and justified and undermines Plantinga's assertion that pluralists are out to deny religious truths. According to the Holy Bible, which Plantinga should be familiar with as someone claiming to be Christian, "Like all translations of the Bible, made as they are by imperfect man, this one undoubtedly falls short of its goals."⁹ This passage from the preface to the Holy Bible is more in agreement with Hick's argument regarding the imperfection of mankind's expression of divine reality than in agreement with Plantinga's unbending exclusivist claims of belief, truth, and possible reality.

Plantinga's seeming trump card in this argument is his appeal to Calvin's *Sensus Divinitatis*. He argues along with Calvin that perhaps Christians are born with an innate sense of the divine that provides confirmation through meditation of their religious beliefs and therefore establishes the truth value of the claims made by Christians regarding the rightness of their religious beliefs over the wrongness of those beliefs of everyone who is not Christian.¹⁰ This argument however does not in the end provide a convincing appeal to reason. What if one argued that Christians were born with *Sensus*

⁷ Ibid. (pp. 517-518)

⁸ Ibid. (p. 503)

⁹ International Bible Society, eds. The Holy Bible. New International Version. Zondervan Publishing House. 1973.

¹⁰ Pojman, Louis P., ed. *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*. 4th Edition. (Wadsworth, 2003). (p.519)

Maleficorum, or a malicious sense, that was mistaken for divine because the one, presumably the devil or some other evil supreme being, wanted a race of men who would feel empowered to rage and war based on a sense of righteousness formed by deep sensitivity towards the will of the evil one that they honestly believe to be the one true God, and whom, all things considered, is actually the God of their people? This evil one, or God, would be good to them and reward them for obedience to his will and would punish anyone who did not recognize his might. But, that is not the picture of an omnipotent, omniscient, beneficent, supreme being/God that loves all humankind. This is certainly not the picture of the Prince of Peace who declares values of absolute humility, generosity, and unconditional love. The Jesus who demands we do not judge others and leave judging to God would find exclusivism reprehensible because it in fact, judges the righteousness of believers based on imperfect human interpretation of God's word or will and therefore is sinful in itself if one were to believe in the teachings of the Bible at all.

Obviously, I find the pluralist arguments to be the most compelling. Plantinga's arguments were not convincing at all, nor did I find the other arguments posited in the book against Hick or for a "middle ground" to be effective in showing why pluralism isn't a legitimate approach to understanding world religion, living in harmony with diverse nations and cultures, and finding a path to commune with the ultimate divine reality. It seems in order to respect individuality and the right of individuals to choose or be chosen for a specific path to redemption or higher understanding, one need be a pluralist.

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There are opportunities to send messages, receive mystery bonus blessings, and more with or without donating available now on our "Pass the Basket" page at <https://www.cope.church/basket.htm> . Thank You.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32 KJV Willful blindness is an abomination.

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