

SOME REFLECTIONS ON TENABILITY OF PLURALISM, TRANSFORMATION AND TRIVIALIZATION OF RELIGIONS

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Discussion on pluralism is often unclear. Common grammar tells us singular and plural are used to indicate numbers of the same kind dog-dogs, man-men, while dog-animal, man-animals are not instances of singular and plural. Sometimes it seems that the inclusivistic, mainly ethically directed characterization of religions try to subsume other religions as a subclass not a genuine instance of a separate entity. Curiously, many trace the roots of philosophic pluralism to the distinction drawn by Immanuel Kant between the data of our sense-experience and its organizing forms of intuition and categories of understanding. We cannot talk about the world without our conceptualization and this paves way for conceptual pluralism and ontological relativism. Donald Davidson rejects conceptual scheme pluralism on grounds that we can accept alternative conceptual schemes only if it is untranslatable into our language or conceptual scheme. We cannot compare or contrast schemes in this sense nor can we speak of a single scheme as we cannot tell what it would be like to be more. Conceptual pluralism is an error as it assumes the scheme content dualism which is the third dogma of empiricism. Maria Baghramian (*On the Plurality of Conceptual Schemes* in *Pluralism* edit. by Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram, Routledge, 2000) tries to reject this position and argues some innocent defensible versions of scheme/content dichotomy which may save some conceptual pluralism without committing us to the pernicious dualism of thought and inconceptualization world and leading to offensive cognitive relativism conceptual schemes or perspectives. In this version, conceptual schemes are embodied in languages and cultures but they are not free floating unrestricted by role that the world plays in shaping conceptualization. Direct access to world is not denied but it is pointed that our life experiences are from different standpoints offering different understandings and coping methods. So there is possibility of alternative ways of life. Can religion be seen as a conceptual scheme in this way? Will religious practitioners of different religions see themselves as being in grip of ‘unvarnished truth’ or ‘a perspective’?

Ordinary believers who may not claim to know perfectly the ‘truth’ which their religion professes may still maintain that they have a relation with that truth through being a member of that community with its seers and books. Just as scientific truths are not known by nonscientists in their completeness yet the community feels

authorized to use the terms so also the religious person may claim his use of terms to be authorized by her or his group faith. The claim still is of truth not perspective. It is often imagined that Liberal theory can address potential conflicts of pluralism, of individual life plans by creating a neutral political space and locating difference in private realms. But can religion understood as world views and more be thus stated? There are strong differences and such pluralism of incommensurable goods is hard for liberalism to accommodate. John Gray from L.S.E also points out that liberalism is not neutral and has an idea of good. Gray concludes in 'Where Pluralists and Liberals part company' (*Ibid*, P. 85-102) that settlements of conflicts are settled by compromises of interests and power.

It is interesting that most liberal thinkers seem to suggest that there is actually no objective value pluralism in terms of a real difference of anchorage as the world is disenchanted and therefore there is only a question of adjustment of power, *modus vivendi*. Liberal explanations of the fact of pluralism refer to the characteristic features of reason in terms of uncertainty, fallibilism and diversity. John Rawls in his account of *Political Liberalism* (1993) speaks how 'many conceptions of the world can plausibly be constructed from different standpoints. Diversity naturally arises from our limited powers and different standpoints'. This would encourage and justify a certain kind of epistemological restraint which may also lead to religious restraint. We are now asked to view our views as provisional and forbidden to impose our truth on others who may disagree with us. Here is a case of reasonable disagreement not objective plurality. Many scholars believe that in the present consciousness of the world, equal rights for all belong to the moral horizon of human beings as they have grown in history. They ground the liberal doctrine of tolerance and accepting plurality on this. However, there will be a problem of adjusting and accommodating conflicting values of the so-called rainbow spectrum in a pluralized public sphere. The other big issue especially with reference to religion is that many religions may not accept the idea of human equality and fallibilism. How are these to be accommodated?

Liberal accommodation may appear as condescension and an advice to cheat to the true believer who is seen as the illiberal. It is a curious liberal theory which allows for groups to exist on equal footing but then put internal restriction into question with reference to human dignity and rights. It is strange why liberals are

squeamish in accepting that their scheme of things is individual rights based and cannot accept groups. Liberal protests of group based, caste and gender based violence and isolations can well be understood in the individual human rights perspective.

Many scholars believe that liberal paternalism does not justify in position of liberal values except in the case of egregious human right violations. But who decides this egregious human rights violation and why human rights to be given precedence over religious duty are is a fairly popular argument of cultural relativist. Curiously, this may also be an argument of a monocultural religious fundamentalist. Where I use the term in an absolutely non-perogative philosophic sense of a believer who considers truth of a religion to be revealed and given. The civic concept of liberalism in Rawls enjoys that citizens view themselves not as inevitably tied to the pursuit of particular concept of the good that they affirm at a given time. Rather as citizens, they are seen as capable of revising and changing this conception on reasonable and rational grounds and they may do so if they so deserve, conversion does not change persons. This however may seem strange to religious practitioners.

There is much debate and argument within the human history but certainly a certain group of Hindus may claim that bound by karma, man is not entirely autonomous, *svadharma*, *sādhāraṇadharmā*, *yugadharmā* have scaffolding. Islam enjoins submission to God as the maker and dispenser of justice. The ideas of fairness, cooperation, rational self-interest may have also found some place in religion but do not seem to determine its authoritativeness. Most religious societies in their vision will be seen as hierarchical and held together by a divine law. Are we demanding a certain double life of a private religion and public civility which requires cheating on either or both?

Advocates of pluralism often take John Hick's understanding of Religious pluralism where it is taken as a view that "the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to realitycenteredness is taking place within religious traditions. There is not one way but a plurality of ways of salvation or liberation... there is a plurality of divine revelation making possible plurality of saving human response" (*Problem of Religious Pluralism*, Macmillan, 1985, P.34). A fairly realistic criticism of Hick's view is given in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* by Philip L. Quinn (1988, P.260) examining the two aspects of plurality hypothesis.

Reality being differently experienced and reality itself being plural. Quinn states ‘It should be noted that on either interpretation, Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis purchases such parity at a high price. It is rival to the main lines of self-understanding within the major religious traditions.

Most members of such traditions would reject the claim that their beliefs are true only of ways in which ultimate reality appears to them, or of the phenomenon objects it contributes to producing, and are not true of that reality as it is in itself. If they employed the distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal, Muslims would be likely to insist that internal reality is personal and *Advaitic* Hindus would be likely to insist that it is impersonal. Hick can attribute only mythological truth to be nothing more than literal falsity plus a tendency to evoke appropriate dispositional attitude. So Hicks vision of pluralism attributes massive literal error to both Muslims and *Advaitic* Hindus. This is not surprising because their traditions remain, for the most part, stoutly pre-Kantian in their self-understanding. Of course, Hick’s pluralism attributes equally large literal error to all other major religious traditions. Hence it will be unacceptable to most people who at this time participate in any of the major religions; such people will prefer to hang onto their doctrinal exclusivism’. I would consider this account to be cogent as a description of such revisionary proposal and its rejection. Many scholars have used the idea of forms of life and language games to understand religion and religious pluralism. I am inclined to believe that most religious practitioners would not accept the line of argument for the same reason, as Quinn rejecting Hick’s proposal. The relativism and contingency of the outlook go against the spirit of religion and its attitude.

Curiously, one of the most popular views on religious pluralism and coping with it is a view which differentiates non-public and public culture of public practice advocating secularism in the realm and learning the inward private domain of conviction for religion. This, again, is a view of scope of religion which would not capture the beliefs of most religious persons. Religion as understood by many religious believers consists of metaphysics, epistemology, a theory of virtue and appropriate individual and social action. The rights and rituals of most rituals are also symbolically connected to their deep metaphysical beliefs (e.g. the process of ‘*Āhuti*’ and chanting ‘*Idam na mama*’ is a practical ritual assertion of non-attachment to

deeds as the ultimate reality is not this ephemeral world. Similarly, in other religions). Different religions do not put forward same spiritual goals which are lacked by their fundamental beliefs. For a Muslim, Shirk is blasphemy. No one can participate in the class of God. For an *Advaita* minded Hindu, this is the real nature of man, the identity with the absolute. Hick's assumption that they are all paths to the same goal is a fond hope, and there is perhaps no religion which believes that scriptural statements are human interpretations subject to modifications. This is well understood by the term 'Gospel Truths'. To suggest that religious standpoints are like an aesthetic worldview having no cognitive claim is also a revision not accepted by followers of religion. Most modern day discussions on society and politics emphasize that like Rawls we must understand society and public sphere as cooperation of equal members who for mutual advantage accept rule-governance which is flexible. This is obviously not what is "a fixed natural order or an institutional hierarchy justified by religious or aristocratic society" (*Political Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, 1993, P. 15) I have obviously been trying to argue that a non-cognitivist reading of religion to accommodate pluralism seems to completely disregard what actual religions and their practitioners say. The often quoted remarks of Wittgenstein that religion is not a body of statements or a doctrine is a peculiarly false description. I now wish to consider briefly the question of presence or absence of reason in religion and possibility of conversation in and on religion.

Let me begin with the Indian philosophic discussion on proofs and disproof of the existence of God which are even with considerable rigour and not treated as just issues of adjustment of power, consensus or convenience. That there is a God as the role agent who creates the world out of pre-existent material and also sustains as well as destroys the world at regular intervals is accepted and argued for in Prasastapada's *Padārthasaṃgraha*, Udyotkar's *Nyāyavartikā* and *Nyāya Kusumāñjali* of Udayana as well as by *Nyāya Bhāṣaṇam* of *Bhāsarvagya* and many others. Properties of God in terms of eternity, immediate knowledge, desire, volition, unconditional mercy, impartiality are also mentioned and problematized. The views about God given by *Nyāya* and *Vaiśeṣika* are also vigorously opposed on many counts by many from the fellow *Veda-sammat* schools as well as outsiders like Buddhists and Jainas. While some argued for the non-necessity of accepting God as

author of *Vedas* or creator of the world, others argued for God's incompatibility with suffering and *Karma*. Also, there is much discussion on possibility of a disembodied God having desire, cognition and volition. Udyotkara discussed at length the satisfactory or dissatisfactory nature of God's creation as *lilā* or natural expression of *svabhava*. The discussion went on for generations. It is charming to see how *Purvamimānsakas* are responded to by *Naiyāyikas* on the question of Vedic Authorship.

Jayanta Bhatta claims that if we admit absurd view that words without author or speaker combine to form sentences may admit that threads weave themselves to form cloth without a weaver. Sridhar Bhatta the author of *Nyāya Kandali* argues that since God has immediate apprehension without error; he has no *rāga*, *dveṣa* or *pravṛtti* due to attachment and so no merit or demerit occurs to him. The Udyotkar-Dharmakīrti reengagement and proving God of *Nyāya* is scrupulous, analytic and enriching. I mention these not to argue on the merits of the reasons but only to illustrate the admission of reason in matters pertaining to central beliefs of religion including God. The epics abound in debates about what is dharma and also whether heroes including Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna and Yudhisthira have followed the path of *Dharma*- the enjoined moral path of righteousness. Here too, I am not arguing for the correctness of arguments or acceptability of the conclusions drawn. I am only suggesting that reason is not restricted from entry in both the ontological as well as the normative discussions of religion. I mention this especially with the reference to some notable philosophers' plea that religion is completely an area of unreason especially Hilary Putnam's last work 'Jewish Philosophy as a way of life'. From scientific realism of 1957 to 1975 to internal realism of 1976 to 1988 to pragmatic realism in later years, Putnam seems to hold on to reason but as the Jewish apologist, he gives it up completely. It is true that from early engagement with verificationism, Putnam's later works argue against representationalism. Influenced by Classical pragmatists like William James and also by John McDowell, he is inclined to disengage from quest of definitive answers to canonical philosophical problems. However, in his 1981 classic *Reason, Truth and History*, he argued that though as subjectivists' claim there is no fixed a-historical organon which defines what it is to be rational, from this we cannot argue that reasons can be anything and end up in

what he called some fancy mixture of cultural relativism and structuralism, like some French philosophers. Putnam in his last work takes Martin Buber, Rosensweig, Levinas and Wittgenstein as part of Jewish way of life. He argues “Like Kierkegaard, I am sure that Wittgenstein would have regarded the idea of proving the Jewish, Christian or Muslim religion by ‘historical evidence’ as a profound confusion of realms, a confusion of inner transformation in one’s life which he saw as the true function of religion with the goals and activities of scientific explanations and predictions” (*Ibid*, p.6).

One may wonder what gives Putnam and his ideals the exclusive right to declare the purpose and nature of ‘true religion’. How do they declare religious motives of hundreds of believers as pseudo-historical, pseudo-juristic, pseudo-logical and pseudo-ethical declaring miracles do not constitute history, martyrdom is not a fact without taking an old positivistic verificationist stance. The understanding may appeal to may but is hugely revisionary where thousands have laid their lives for homeland and faith including Jews. Jewish mysticism sometimes speaks of concealment and four levels of reading the *Bible* Pshat- literal, Remez- Hint based on the literal, Drash-allegorical interpretation and God-hidden secret mystical. But is this account to give up reason completely? Putnam announces “Religious beliefs could only be like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it is a belief, it is a way of luring or a way of assessing life” (*Ibid*, p.21). Since Jewish religion is a way of life, therefore it is exempt from reason- debate and law has a familiar resonance in some of our local apologists. Religions are often offered as loving alternatives of mutual availability in needness as Levinas’ notion of Nineni suggests.

But in times where local and global conflicts of identity have taken threatening proportions, the space for rational dialogue needs expansion rather than reduction. As mentioned earlier, Indian epics present huge critical argumentation and Bimal Krishna Matilal wittily remarks, “The point however is that tradition did not have to wait until something like the age of enlightenment came in order to question basis of moral and religious beliefs”. (*Ethics and Epics*, OUP, 2002, p.52). So whether is God characters or others, there is discussion not acquiescence in ways of life. Five authorities of *Dharma* are alluded to by Manu:

- *Vedas*
- *Dharmaśāstras*
- Virtues of Vedic scholars
- Good conduct of the honest
- Satisfaction of the mind.

This bespeaks of rational debate in the light of *tarka*. In case of dispute, a jury is suggested with interesting detail. Three scholars of three *Vedas*, one logician Haituka, one dialectician - *Tarka*, one expert of semantics and etymology, one *Dharmaśāstri*, one celibate student, one householder and one retired person. Subjecting revision to reason and analysis seems still welcome to some seeking cosmopolitanism. We are well reminded that several analytic thinkers like R.M.Hare, Bertrand Russell, Isaiah Berlin and others believed that German behavior in Second World War was due to philosophic errors. In combination of the structure of the ethical language was well understood and empirical facts well and clearly stated. This would be a powerful weapon against totalitarianism. Philosophical debates on religion seem to be a little timid in their approach. As I argue, it seems most discussions on religion and religious pluralism create space for religion by changing its character- keep its factual cognitive claims out, convert it into some private attitudinal commitment without publicity. Outside the technical realms of academic philosophy, sometimes we find bold comparisons of religion and suggestions. Rajiv Malhotra considers certain anxieties based on postures of difference and response with his arguments. He believes that those who claim that there is the only true religion and all must convert to it have an attitude stemming from Judeo-Christian religions, while Indian spirituality not only allows for religious pluralism but is built on it. He argues that enculturation also does not show respect for natures, cultures and is a deception to gain easy entry to retain a strategy of subverting the native faith. Interestingly, he responds to *Hindutva* ideology as being too political and reactionary, which adapts the western approach of difference and excessive emphasis on unique history. Malhotra refers to the tradition of considering *purvapakṣa* thoroughly by the Indian philosophical tradition which needs to be reconsidered for “an understanding of the need to reform and correct the self aggrandizing and self referential institutional network- that produce cultural analysis including academic institutions, foundations, the media and publishers” (*Being Different*, Harper Collins, 2011, p.50). Malhotra refers to Fanon, Sarte and said as instances of gaze reversal to the west. Never

seriously considered by philosophic community, Malhotra has some interesting proposals in the critical part of his work. The constructive part however borders on soft romanticism where it is carelessly assumed that since philosophic tradition had the *Purvapakṣa* representation and response, the lived reality also had the same responsiveness. However, he has the boldness to ask such questions. Can the person whose religion prohibits idol worship respect the idol worshipper in a non patronizing way? Malhotra presents an Indian challenge to western universalism which is apparently curious. Sunil Khilnani while writing on the *'Idea of India'* (Penguin, 1998) thought that Nehru quarantine national politics from religious demands. Some others timidly advocate secularism as a cross-cutting constitutional obligation in intercommunity issues, while liberalism in each community persuading their co-religionists to abandon absolute and reactionary practices. This response of patronizing look at religious and other communities is based on a crew which disenfranchises the very claim of religion as 'truthbearer'.

Several philosophers like Clifford had spoken of epistemic responsibility not to accept anything without evidence. James responded to it by claiming that religion is a 'live' momentous choice forced on us and cannot wait for evidence. Kierkegaard declares objectivity to be only suggestive of postponement and argues that in religion, it is subjectivity and personal relation to believe that matters. A robust philosophical analysis would be an invitation to clarify what it is to be religious? What is the scope of fallibilism within religion? How do we debate with others including other religions? What is to count as evidence? How do absolute truths of religion function in the so-called post-truth worlds? How do we carry on conversations? Is religion truly a conversation stopper? As Richard Rorty titled one of his provocative essays? Rorty gives up the epistemic notion of rationality as a virtue as it presupposes that human subject can surmount appearance and reach reality. But in giving this up, he has given up on the principle beliefs of most religion. The moral notion of rationality that he advocates is only a preference of persuasion over force. ('The Ambiguity of Rationality' in *Pluralism and the Pragmatic Turn*, ed. William Reha and James Bahman, MIT Press, 2001).

To some like Stephen L. Carter, privatization of religion is trivializing it. Rorty argues that love, family and poetic joy are not trivial but private (Feminists would

worry). Search for private perfection in a pluralistic democracy is allowed but not relevant to Public Policy. Pluralistic democracy will beat voice of God, reason, science etc. all at par. For Richard Rorty, the spiritual depth of a democratic participant in public debate is as relevant to public debate as is her hobby or hair color (*Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin, 1999, P. 174). This I believe is not a conversation stopper.

However, in the new discussions of democracy in the so-called West, people imagine that discussions on Religion and Political authority have shifted. Entries in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on 'Religion and Political Theory' (2015) begin by saying "In the first place divine authorization account of political authority has lost the day to consent based approaches" with the reality of Islamic state and its influential presence this is an ostrich like assertion. The whole discussion on religious restraint in public discussion presupposes an assent to pragmatic view of not only politics but also of philosophy. There also is a suggestion of new traditionalists that they need to distance themselves from the liberal state and live in small communities which our allegiance to the Church or some larger religious traditions.

It is however interesting that some religious scholars trace back liberal ideas of human rights to Buddhism, *Quoran*, *Avesta* and the *Vedas*. This is contested by MacIntyre and many others. However, how is it that we continue conversation maintaining tenability of pluralism without transforming or trivializing religion? Also, how do non-foundationalists and foundationalist philosophers keep the conversation going? This is a question for us to ponder in times where it is almost assumed that all discussions of plurality, unity, interpretation and truth will be discussed within the paradigm of impure reason, practical significance and American neopragmatism.