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Ibn al ʿArabī, Hick and Religious Pluralism

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze and give a critical examination of some basic issues of religious pluralism by reference to the mystical philosophy of Muhyi al-Din Ibn al ʿArabī, who thought that various religious beliefs are to be considered as an outcome of different forms of the divine manifestation. In so doing, in order to show the relevance of Ibn al ʿArabī's thought to the contemporary debate of religious pluralism—in the philosophy of religion in particular—I first give a brief description of John Hick's religious pluralism. Then I examine Ibn al ʿArabī's thinking on the issue and attempt to display the philosophical as well as theological problems it raises. I conclude that Ibn al ʿArabī's approach fails to address the problems facing religious pluralism inasmuch as it falls into the trap of a relativism which trivializes philosophical and religious truths-claims and also the ontological commitment of the traditional religious beliefs.

Although the diversity of religious beliefs has always been a subject of philosophical and religious concern, it will be no exaggeration to say that it is only in the recent couple of decades that the issue has been so lively debated. The diversity of religions is a *fact*, but this needs to be carefully distinguished from that the idea of religious pluralism which is advanced as a theoretical explanation for such a phenomenon. The question of the diversity of religious beliefs should be evident: each religion puts forward a different set of religious truth-claims ranging from the nature of God to the human salvation. There is, to start with, a significant difference between the theistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the non-theistic religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. The most common feature of the theistic religions is their agreement on the *personal* nature of God, a conviction which is not shared by the non-theistic religions. However, there are further differences within the theistic as well as non-theistic religions themselves. Thus, for instance, the doctrines of the divine trinity and incarnation, which are essential to the Christian faith, are in sharp contrast to Islamic concept of deity, which forcefully underlines the absolute unity (oneness) and transcendence of God.

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Now, it may seem as a natural disposition to wonder how all these religions can equally be true or justified in their truth-claims. Is there a shared ground behind this diversity? In other words, to what extent is the contention that "all religions refer to the same Being or God" justified? Apart from the naturalistic and, arguably, reductionist explanations for the diversity of religious beliefs, there have been different *religious* approaches at this point. These attitudes are often characterized as exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Religious exclusivism argues for the truth of just *one* religion to the exclusion of the others; only *the* religion can gain warrant or truth and the rest of religions therefore are unwarranted or simply false. The salvation can thus be attained only through the faith and practice of one particular religion. Religious inclusivism, on the other hand, stands for the idea that although the religious truth is ultimately restricted to one religion, the followers of the other religious traditions can somewhat be included in the salvation. And finally, religious pluralism holds that all religious traditions are somewhat equally warranted inasmuch as each of them reflects at least a partial truth with regard to the ultimate religious Reality or Truth. Hence they all can justifiably lead to salvation [Quinn and Meeker 2000: 3].

Given that faith involves propositional truth-claims one might rightly think that an exclusivist attitude is somewhat inevitable. The truth of any religious belief that *p* will make any proposition that contradicts with *p* false. As Ward points out, "To believe a proposition is to think that it is true. To think that it is true is to affirm that reality is as it is described by that proposition. … Thus an affirmation by its nature excludes some possible state of affairs; namely, one which would render the proposition false. If an assertion excludes nothing, it affirms nothing" [1990: 110]. A realist concept of truth thus seems to be essential to the traditional understanding of religious belief.[1] Truth therefore matters for one's faith.

The exclusivist standpoint has often been criticized, by the pluralists in particular, to be an arrogant attitude reflecting a self-appreciated superiority to other faiths. John Hick, who is the leading defender of religious pluralism in the contemporary philosophy of religion, thinks that an exclusivist view of religious belief is unjustified and therefore he instead proposes an improvement through a revision or transformation in all major religious traditions [1989: 2]. It is however a question whether a pluralistic view can do justice to the nature of religious belief, apart from the philosophical and theological questions which it seems to have generated. In the greater part of this paper, I shall conduct a critical examination of the credentials of the religious pluralism by a particular reference to the mystical thought of Muhyi al-Din Ibn al 'Arabī (1164-1240). Before this, however, in order

1) A pluralist such as Hick [1993: 3] too seems to have agreed to this fact.

to see the relevance of Ibn al 'Arabī's thought to the contemporary debate, I shall provide a brief account of Hick's religious pluralism.

Hick's religious pluralism seems to have an epistemological motivation to the extent that he propounds *the pluralistic hypothesis* as an explanatory answer to various forms of religious experience. Considering varieties of religious experience as instantiated in different religious traditions, the pluralistic hypothesis is meant to provide an explanation by postulating a common reference for them. Each type of religious experience is considered to be a response to *the Real*. However, the Real *in itself*, as the Ultimate Reality, is beyond all experiential categories. In developing his pluralistic hypothesis, Hick starts with the observation that the world is religiously ambiguous and this, in his view, makes a naturalistic as well as a religious interpretation of religious experience equally possible. Following a middle route between a naturalistic and a religious interpretation of religious experience, Hick argues for "the third possibility that the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to the ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it" [1989: 235-236]. What makes the post-axial religious traditions (such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism) particularly distinctive, on this account, is the fact that they all aim at a radical transformation of the human reality from being self-centered to the Reality or Divine-centered. In all these traditions, in Hick's view, there is an attempt to free the human life from a self-centered state by associating it to a further fact, called it God, Reality or Truth [Hick 1988: 2].

What seems to have led Hick to think that all these diverse religious experiences should be considered in the same boat is his meta-epistemological intuition that all human experience is actively processed by the epistemic make-up of their subjects. At this point, Hick makes a reference to the Muslim Sufi thinker Junaid's idea that "the colour of the water is the same as that of its container" and also to the similar observation of St Thomas Aquinas that "things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower" [1989: 240-241]. From this, Hick concludes that all the forms of religious experience are inevitably shaped by the noetic structure of the subjects who are in turn influenced by the "religio-cultural systems [in which] … the Real is thought and experienced…"[1989: 241]. At the bedrock of Hick's thought is the Kantian meta-epistemological intuition that the human mind, through its categories and concepts, regulates our sensory experience or perception. This, along with the Kantian lines, leads Hick to make a distinction of *noumena* and *phenomena* in grounding religious experience: the Real *in itself* is postulated as the *noumenal* ground of the religious experiential *phenomena*. Unlike the Kantian categories that are 'universal and invariable,' the categories of religious experience, Hick argues, are 'culture-relative.' Even so, various phenomenal experiences of the Real are considered to be

empirically genuine or the authentic manifestations of the Real [1989: 241-244].[2] Thus Hick maintains:

> …our human religious experience, variously shaped as it is by our sets of religious concepts, is a cognitive response to the universal presence of the ultimate divine Reality that, in itself, exceeds human conceptuality. This Reality is however manifested to us in ways formed by a variety of human concepts, as the range of the divine personae and metaphysical impersonae witnessed to in the history of religions. Each major tradition, built around its own distinctive way of thinking-and-experiencing the Real, has developed its own answers to the perennial questions of our origin and destiny, constituting more or less comprehensive and coherent cosmologies and eschatologies. These are human creations which have, by their association with living streams of religious experience, become invested with a sacred authority. However they cannot all be wholly true; quite possibly none is wholly true: perhaps all are partly true [1988: 63-64].

Given the sharp distinction between *the Real in itself* and *the Real as experienced and conceptualized* by the religious traditions in various ways, on this account, it follows that no tradition is able to make substantial claims about the nature of the Real inasmuch as none of the human experiential categories or concepts really applies to the Real *an sich*.

In developing his religious pluralism, Hick often makes references to the mystical interpretations of the religious traditions (more significantly in the case of theistic religions) rather than to their mainstream understanding. In the case of Islamic tradition, it is true that there are some mystical interpretations which can be considered in the context of a pluralistic religious thought.[3] Now it seems to me that, in Islamic thought, it is in the mystical thought of Ibn al ʻArabī where one can find the dynamics for a pluralistic account of religious beliefs.

Although the conceptual scheme of Ibn al ʻArabī's metaphysics has a significant resemblance to Hick's account of religious pluralism, nonetheless there are some important methodological differences between them. Similarly, Ibn al ʻArabī uses the term of 'the Real (*al-Haqq*)'[4] to denote God

2) As Hick himself notices [1989: 243], it is important to note that Kant's own religious epistemology is entirely unrelated to Hick's. For, Kant simply postulates the existence of God in the context of the metaphysics of morality and excludes His existence from the domain any possible experience.

3) For a typical approach on these grounds see Nasr [1972: 123-151]; and for a comparative study of Hick and Nasr on the issue of religious pluralism see Aslan [1998].

4) The Arabic term of '*al-Haqq*,' which can be rendered as 'the Real' or 'the Truth' in English, is at the same time one of Divine names in Islam. Unlike Hick's view of the Real, which is neither personal nor impersonal in character; Ibn al ʻArabī's considerations about *al-Haqq* seem to suggest that he operates within a theistic framework. It will therefore be correct to think that Ibn al ʻArabī conceives the *al-Haqq* with personal properties. For an assessment of the concept of '*al-Haqq*' in Islam and its relation to 'the Real' as used by Hick, see Reçber [2005: 3-10]; and also see Hick [2005: 11-14].

or the Ultimate being and likewise he makes an ontological distinction between the Real *in himself* and his different manifestations. His primary target however is not to give a pluralistic account of religious belief. It is rather to provide an explanation for the whole phenomena where the plurality (as well as the pluralism) of religious beliefs is just one of the implications of his vast metaphysical system. Although the epistemological views of Ibn al ʻArabī might have its significant share for developing a religious pluralism, his ontological intuitions seem to have priority to the extent that they lie at the bedrock of his epistemological pluralism.

Al-Junaid's statement that "the colour of the water is the same as that of its container" likewise seems to have a considerable impact on Ibn al ʻArabī's ideas concerning the nature of religious belief [Ibn al ʻArabī 1982: 225-226]. But, how are we to understand such a statement? A first approximation would be to think that a religious belief is somehow determined by the intellectual nature or capacity of the believer. Given that there can be non-human belief-holders whose intellectual make-up and capacity is significantly different (since, it is not clear that the only possible belief-holders are humans), then the nature and scope of their beliefs will be different from ours. In this case, the structure of our minds (just like the Kantian view) will determine the nature and limits of all possible beliefs (hence knowledge) held by us. Nonetheless such a conceptual relativism seems to be rather trivial if taken as an argument for religious pluralism. Had this been the case, it would have been difficult to conceive how the diversity of religious beliefs could have come into existence, since the structure of the human mind would have imposed the same set of beliefs on each believer. If so, such an interpretation of al-Junaid's statement cannot fulfill the task required for grounding religious pluralism insofar as it will fail to explain the diversity of faiths exemplified by various religious traditions. Nor is this what the religious pluralist seems to have in mind.

Another way of understanding al-Junaid's statement would be, as Hick proposes, to think it in terms of a conceptual/epistemic relativism of "religio-cultural systems" in which the Real is variously experienced and conceptualized. Although such an approach might not be ultimately incompatible with Ibn al ʻArabī's account of religious diversity, nevertheless he seems to have defended a strong form of relativism which explains not only the differences that manifest at the level of religious traditions but also those exemplified at the individual-level. For Ibn al ʻArabī, as William C. Chittick points out, "No two people have exactly the same belief, because no two people are exactly the same" [1989: 336].

The basic reason for the diversity of religious belief at the individual level, for Ibn al ʻArabī, is that the divine manifestation (*tajallī*) comes in infinitely many different forms and grades. The heart, which he takes to be the intellectual faculty receptive of the divine manifestation, has a variable

(flexible) character in accordance with the divine manifestation: "Provided that the Real varies in his manifestation of the forms, then necessarily the heart becomes wide and narrow according to the form in which the divine manifestation takes place" [Ibn al 'Arabī 1982: 120]. On the face of it, this can be taken to the effect that the Real manifests himself in the heart of a believer in proportion to her capacity or disposition. Given that the believers naturally have various degrees of dispositions or capabilities with regard to forming beliefs, the diversity of religious beliefs will then be inevitable. Necessarily each believer will form a different idea or conception of God.

What is the ontological ground for the prior dispositions in receiving various degrees of the divine manifestations and hence for forming various religious beliefs? It is at this point where Ibn al 'Arabī's thought reveals its distinctive character. It is not the case that the Real manifests himself to the believer according to his predisposition; on the contrary, the believer is manifested to the Real through the form in which the Real manifests himself to him [Ibn al 'Arabī 1982: 120]. The metaphysical background of this line of thought has a rather complex dialectical structure. The idea that, in Corbin's words, the "Divine Being ... yearn[s] to be revealed in beings who manifest Him to Himself insofar as He manifests Himself to them" [1969: 184] is rather essential for understanding the structure of Ibn al 'Arabī's metaphysical thought. Therefore it seems correct to think with Corbin that, on Ibn al 'Arabī's account, "It is not the heart that gives its "color" to the Form it receives, but on the contrary, the gnostic's heart "is colored" in every instant by the color, that is, the modality of the Form in which the Divine Being is epiphanized to him" [Corbin 1969: 196]. Therefore the diversity of religious beliefs is not something simply grounded in the epistemic imperfection of the believers; that is, it is not something merely stemming from the epistemic subjects' being fallible in their attempt to recognize the Real. Religious diversity has its deeper ontological roots which find their possibility in the very nature of the divine manifestation.

It may be correct to think that Ibn al 'Arabī's view of belief-forming-activities presupposes an epistemic (conceptual) relativity but, given his further ontological considerations, one has to think that it is God himself who causes this diversity *via* his manifestation in different forms which, in turn, gives different predispositions to different believers in forming various beliefs. In order to explain how God can be responsible for the very predisposition or receptivity of the heart of the believers, Ibn al 'Arabī argues that there are two different types of the divine manifestation: the *noumenal* (*ghayb*) manifestation and the *phenomenal* (*shahādah*) manifestation. The former manifestation is the divine self-manifestation that provides the heart with the predisposition it has; it is only after the occurrence of this manifestation that the latter (the *phenomenal*) manifestation can take place. God, in the *phenomenal* level, manifests himself to the heart of the believer in terms of a

form already manifested [Ibn al ʻArabī 1982: 120]. Thus, one might think, in making the distinction between the *noumenal* and *phenomenal* divine manifestations, Ibn al ʻArabī was actually trying to provide a meta-epistemological explanation for the diversity of religious beliefs.

From an epistemological viewpoint, it will be correct to think that the formation of a concept of God depends on the pre-dispositional capacity of the believer. The formation of various concepts of the Real is a matter of certain belief-forming capacities which are answerable to the fact that the Real manifests himself to the hearts of the believers in line with their pre-determined dispositions. The Real as believed by a believer is in fact nothing but an object of belief.[5] Given that a concept of God thus conceived is something which the believer in a sense creates in his heart (mind), it will not be wrong to think that, according to Ibn al ʻArabī, "People create the objects of their own belief by imposing conceptual limitations upon the *wujūd*" [Chittick 1994: 151]. The truth of the matter, however, is that all these conceptual limitations are caused or determined by nothing other than the divine manifestation. The truth of any belief is therefore explained by reference to an all-embracing being (*wujūd*) which is identical with the Real. In Chittick's words, "God assumes the form of every belief because the belief itself is nothing but the self-disclosure of *wujūd*" [1994: 151].

Since it is God who manifests himself in the hearts of believers in different ways—which is the very ground of the phenomenon of religious diversity—Ibn al ʻArabī suggests us not to put any restriction on religious beliefs:

> Then the Real in the belief is the one the heart surrounds his form, it is that which is manifested for it [i.e., the heart] and hence it knows him. The eye does not see but the Real of the belief. And the diversity of beliefs is no secret: Whoever delimits him disbelieves him in [those beliefs] other than the one which he delimits, and confirms him when manifested in the way he delimits him. And whoever frees him from delimitation does not deny but affirms him in every form in which he transforms... [Ibn al ʻArabī 1982: 121].

This line of thought can be reinforced by the semantic consideration that the very root (*ʻa.q.d.*) of the word used for belief (*iʼtiqad*) in Arabic has a connotation of putting certain limitations in terms of knitting, knotting etc., on something. Thus a particular religious belief expresses a limitation on the Real who is in fact unlimited [see Chittick 1994: 138].

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5) In fact, according to Ibn al ʻArabī, the deity to whom the believer is committed and the one he glorifies is the God as an object of his belief. Interestingly enough, Ibn al ʻArabī seems to maintain that the believer in fact, in so doing, glorifies himself. See [Ibn al ʻArabī 1982: 225-226].

Clearly, Ibn al ʻArabī seems to have attached a negative sense to a religious belief expressing a limitation on the Real. Or, at least, he thought any such belief is pre-mature or somehow imperfect even though he also, somewhat paradoxically, found it necessary that there be different exclusive beliefs for the relevant manifold divine manifestations to take place. Such an ontological intuition seems to have led him to embrace all different and even contradictory beliefs formed about the Real, which are considered as partly true or authentic. Thus considering the identification between 'God' [the Real] and the *wujūd* [Being or Existence] in Ibn al ʻArabī's ontology, Chittick writes:

> If a belief did not correspond to reality in some way, it would not exist. Each belief represents the subjective side of an existential state. The fact that someone holds a belief proves that the belief coincides in some manner in the way things are, whether or not the believer's mind establishes a real contact with what lies outside of itself. Hence we can reach a preliminary conclusion that all beliefs are true, no matter what their content. There can be no error in existence, because everything that exists is demanded by the Real, which is *wujūd* [Chittick 1994: 139].

Note that, on this account, no particular evidence is provided for thinking that each belief is partly true because it has some partial correspondence to *wujūd* or the Real save the assumption already made for the supposed ontologically unity. For, in Chittick's words, "[t]he idea that there are no errors and that all beliefs are true rises up logically from *wahdat al-wujūd*. Each existent thing represents a particular self-disclosure of non-delimited *wujūd*" [Chittick 1994: 140]. But is there any further reason for thinking that every religious belief is or can be true apart from the assumptions made for an ontological unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujūd*)? Epistemological considerations certainly matter here: how do we know that all these religious beliefs are partly true or even related to the Real in one way or another? Why not instead think that they are simply false conceptions of the Real? What criterion do we have for thinking that no particular belief can be overwhelmingly true of the Real save the pluralist one?

It seems that, for Ibn al ʻArabī, only the gnostic (*ʻarif*) can have a privileged epistemic access to the fact that various religious beliefs are simply infinite different forms in which God manifests or transforms himself. There are no bounds to the gnostic's knowledge at this point because it should have an epistemic parallelism to the infinite forms of the divine manifestation [Ibn al ʻArabī 1982: 120]. Given such a parallelism the gnostic's knowledge needs to be open-ended if it is to have a correspondence to the divine manifestational forms that are infinite: the gnostic is in a position to consider any religious belief as still another form of the divine manifestation.

By the same token, for Ibn al 'Arabī, one should *not* exclude any object of worship but consider each as the manifesting-place for the worship of the Real. Someone who worships, say, a stone, or a tree, or an animal or a star attributes a property of 'divinity' to it [Affīfī 1979: 148]. The gnostic, being well-aware of this fact, perfectly observes that they do not worship these beings (*as such*) but the divine manifestation (the divine presence) in them, whereas the ignorant is oblivious of such a fact [Ibn al 'Arabī 1982: 195-196]. Ibn al 'Arabī thus seems to have thought that just any kind of religious belief, from a simple form of idolatry to the intellectually most sophisticated religions, leads to God when considered from the right angle. That is, when they are considered as different forms or aspects of the divine manifestation [Affīfī 1979: 148]. Thus, as Affīfī observes, "Ibnul 'Arabī does not reject polytheism provided that the worshippers of images and idols fully realise that there is reality behind the "forms" as mere *mejālī* (theatres) or *wujūh* (aspects) or manifestations of this Reality" [1979: 149]. But, then, what exactly is the faith of the gnostic?

From what has been said so far, one can easily conclude that the faith of Ibn al 'Arabī's gnostic is a pluralist or rather, a 'holistic' one. Since the gnostic knows that all these different beliefs are the outcome of various divine manifestations he takes them to be proper or authentic beliefs in God. Although Ibn al 'Arabī's thought thus embraces all different beliefs formed about God, one can rightly expect him to be, at least implicitly, critical of each of these religious beliefs if held independently. This must be so because none of the descriptions given by a particular religious belief is sufficient to refer to the Real but the one which embraces them all. Considering that only a deity who is thus conceived in a holistic manner can be the Real as a causal power Ibn al 'Arabī unites all these different religious beliefs in his understanding [Ibn al 'Arabī 1982: 122]. Thus he says,

> People have formed different beliefs about God,
> And I *behold all* that they believe [quoted in Affīfī 1979: 151].

The basic reason why such a holistic view of religious belief should be true needs to be sought in Ibn al 'Arabī's concept of the Real: the Real is infinite and therefore no restrictive formulation given in a particular belief can be exhaustively true of him. Although it always remains true that any deity determined by a particular belief is a restricted one, the Absolute Deity can never be thus circumscribed as he is identical with all things and still with himself. And it would be nonsensical to say that a thing comprises itself or that it can be comprised by itself [Ibn al 'Arabī 1982: 225-226].

Now, one can reasonably agree with Ibn al 'Arabī on the question of the divine infinity to the extent that no particular set of propositions comprised by a given religious belief can *exhaust* every

truth about the divine nature, nevertheless it is still far from being clear why an all-inclusive pluralist view in the way conceived by Ibn al ʻArabī should be true.

As seen, there are both inclusivist and pluralist elements in Ibn al ʻArabī's thought. It is inclusivist in that it grants a partial truth to any religious belief and it is pluralist as it takes the diversity of religious beliefs to be ultimately grounded in the divine manifestation. In any case, it excludes no religious belief. This is because Ibn al ʻArabī's approach in essence supervenes on his fundamental ontological consideration that the divine manifestation occurs in infinite various forms. He also tries to maintain that such a view of religious belief is compatible with the basic the Islamic tenets. In fact he finds a parallelism between the gnostic's all-inclusive belief and the all-embracing character of the Qur'an: Islamic revelation embraces all previously revealed religions, but not *vice versa*.[6)]

Despite the inclusivist elements in Ibn al ʻArabī's thought there might be good reasons for thinking that his approach has some similarities to Hick's religious pluralism. Both views presuppose an epistemological relativism regarding the experience and conceptualizations of the Real. Nevertheless, Ibn al ʻArabī's religious pluralism has a further ontological ground which is explained by reference to certain possibilities actualized by the Real himself. Ibn al ʻArabī's religious pluralism therefore cannot be explained simply by reference to the epistemological considerations inasmuch as such an epistemological relativism has its ontological roots in the prior possibilities that are consequently actualized *qua* different forms of the divine self-manifestation. Hick's pluralism, on the other hand, depends on an epistemological relativism of religious beliefs, where the existence of the Real is postulated as an explanatory being for the diversity of religious phenomena. For Hick, the plurality of religious beliefs is ultimately grounded in the different *human* responses to the Real *an sich*; whereas, for Ibn al ʻArabī, it is grounded in the very nature of the divine self-manifestation. Ibn al ʻArabī's pluralism therefore is not humanly but divinely originated.

On the other hand, in Hick's view, the satisfactory conditions for referring to the Real *in itself* are determined by the concept of a transformation from self-centredness to the Reality-centredness; while, for Ibn al ʻArabī, no religious belief may fail to refer to the Real because of its unique ontological ground. One might therefore rightly conclude that, on Ibn al ʻArabī's account, *all beliefs are necessarily the Real-centered*, even though no belief has the full correspondence to the Real.

Ibn al ʻArabī's pluralism also seems to have an inclusivist character in that it rejects no

6) In fact, this point can be controversial, but this is beyond our present interest. For further information on this issue, see Chittick [1994: 145-146]. By the way, it may be interesting to notice a similarity between Ibn al ʻArabī's considerations about all-inclusive nature of Islamic revelation and Hegel's dialectical argument developed for the idea that Christianity is the absolute religion.

particular religious belief as false. Yet, it is not hard to see that he has an implicit argument to the effect that the *only* proper religious belief is the gnostic's all-inclusive pluralist belief. *Prima facie*, the gnostic's faith involves the particular belief that, 'all diverse religious beliefs are different forms of the divine manifestation.' This view depends for its validity on reasoning that from the statement that 'all religious beliefs are partially true' it does not follow that 'all religious beliefs are partially false.' Instead the desired inference is that none of them is *wholly* true. Unfortunately, in defense of such view, Ibn al 'Arabī has little to say other than his ontological assumption for the unity underlying the manifold forms of the divine manifestation. In the absence of such an assumption, it will be rather difficult to make a sense of such a religious pluralism.

But, it remains rather difficult to give a proper characterization of a faith that is inclusive of simply any religious belief. For, it is hard to conceive how so many different and even contradictory beliefs can all be true of a 'whole,' whose referent is considered to be the Real. Given the conceptual necessity that the very idea of 'whole' presupposes the idea of coherence (and therefore, the law of non-contradiction), it must be an *a priori* constraint that there cannot be 'an incoherent whole' and therefore 'a whole of contradictory beliefs.'

After all, can there be an unrestricted (or an open-ended) belief at all? If it is somehow necessary that a belief involves a propositional content p such that it asserts that p is true of x, then it must follow that just any belief is restrictive in nature including the belief in the plurality of beliefs. If so, the idea that there can be a non-restrictive belief which involves no propositional content about the Real seems to face a self-referential incoherence.

One can also question the very ontological ground for Ibn al 'Arabī's pluralism. Let alone the fact that it is hard to conceive how different contradictory properties instantiated by different religions or believers can all be taken as the different forms of the divine manifestation (i.e., the manifestational properties of the Real), there seems to be no reason for thinking that a belief must be somehow 'true' simply because it enjoys the property of existence. There can be a weak sense in which, one might think, *whatever exists has an ontological reality* and perhaps an '*ontological truth*,' but this can hardly be the required sense of 'truth' needed in the particular context of a religious belief. For example, following Ibn al 'Arabī's reasoning, we might think that if one believes that 'the world is square in shape' or that '2+2=5,' then these beliefs would enjoy a mode of existence (i.e., they would have some ontological truth), yet this can hardly be sufficient for thinking that these propositions are, as a matter of fact, true. That is to say, one can entertain a false or indeed a necessarily false proposition and, in this case, such a proposition might enjoy a mode of existence, but this cannot make a change to its truth-value. It therefore seems that one has to make a crucial distinction

between the *existence* and *truth* of a belief.

For these and similar reasons, it seems to me that such a pluralist view cannot do justice to the nature of religious belief. What makes a pluralist view unacceptable from a traditional religious (at least, theistic) point of view is the fact that it makes the truth-claims of all religions rather trivial by considering them as partial 'truths.' But given that it is hard to see how all these contradictory beliefs can be held together, this may lead one to a non-realist (non-cognitivist) understanding of religious truth-claims. Whereas, on the traditional understanding, what distinguishes a religion from the others; namely what gives a religion its particular character—identity—is its truth claims. But is there a criterion for deciding the truth or authenticity of a religious belief on the pluralist view?

As we have seen, Hick develops "the Reality-centredness" as criterion but since he leaves the nature of "the Reality" rather unclear, one can hardly draw a sound conclusion from his proposal. Ibn al 'Arabī's account, on the other hand, seems to avoid this problem at the cost of allowing simply any belief as 'warranted' or 'true.' This however makes all religious truth-claims trivial by considering them either as the products of the creative mental activity of the human mind or as a part of the infinite diverse forms of the divine manifestation.

To conclude, it seems to me that a pluralist view of religious belief, apart from certain philosophical problems which it raises, is also untenable as it fails to meet the traditional religious intuitions. The basic reason for its failure in providing a satisfactory account consists in its relativistic character which inevitably trivializes the truths-claims and therefore ontological commitments of the traditional religious beliefs. If pluralism is to do justice to the problem of religious diversity, it seems to me that it should not fall into the trap of such a relativism. Yet it hard to see how such a pluralist view might proceed insofar as a realist view is taken to be intrinsic to the truth-claims of religious beliefs.

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