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AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LOGICAL
PREMISES OF PLURALISM

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I shall discuss the logic of the belief in the frame of John Hick's arguments for his pluralistic hypothesis. The logic will indicate the epistemic ground which is raised upon certain belief-values. These belief-values or in other sense objects of belief are to be analyzed through certain epistemic approaches. This is not only important for Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions but other world religions have also produced similar interpretative attitudes towards the perception of reality. One has to choose his/her epistemic grounds of how to evaluate these certain truth-values. Hick argues that every religion reaches the same reality in different ways. They all have their unique ways to find out what is the reality. Definitions of conception of the Transcendent are different in various religions; however, it is important to analyse epistemologically how to evaluate the human perception of the Divine Reality which appears astoundingly similar in world religions.

Key Words: Epistemology, Logical Analysis, John Hick, Pluralism

The logic of belief is a very crucial problem to understand the philosophical approach to religious arguments. The logic requires here to clarify the concepts and grounds of belief on the basis of main principles and themes of the subject-matter (Mitchell: 1958). In the case of pluralism, an understanding of the central concept of the "Ultimate Reality" is determined by numerous different interpretations and these are deeply rooted in historic, traditional, cultural, and personal approaches. Despite the fact that every religious understanding has their own truth-claims concerning the object of its faith, there has always been a speculation on what is Divine Ultimate Reality.

Discussions with regards to the articles of faith, creating creeds, producing theologies and arguing in philosophy have always had the

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elements of epistemological differences, just as much as the efforts about what the religion itself promotes (Russell 1956: 283-320). Understanding of reality relates to almost every subject in religion, however, the main problem is how to find out what is ‘reality’. Search for reality becomes more important to be consistent and coherent for truth-values for religious concepts (Fischer 1999: 106). J. Hick tries to distinguish between Real-in-itself and the Real-as-humanly-thought-and-experienced. (Hick 1989: 236-240). This attempt introduces many-valued logic, instead of Aristotelian two-valued logic. There can be more than a black and white spectrum in truth claims. It is not east task to criticise epistemic and logical understanding of differences of world religions.

In Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, Hick’s exclusivism refers to people who believe in that there is only one true ‘reality’ claim, which is the only valid path to salvation and that other understandings of truth are erroneous. In the ‘one world’ of today there is a necessity to refocus on our self-understanding of the reality which always has been presented within each of traditions (Hick 2005: 14). On the other hand, Inclusivism indicates a toleration of the truth-values of other understandings and beliefs. It is asserted that the term pluralism here indicates that the great world religions have the same level of truth-values. Their creeds are reasonably and equally valid; at least their contributions to understanding of the common religious frame should be taken equally. Are great world religions equally true? If they are equally true, how is it possible to interpret the different and even contradictory truth-value statements about ‘reality’? Are we talking about a reductionist interpretation of ‘reality’ through diminishing truth-value claims to meaningless statements or is there in fact the logic of belief works completely different than ordinary logic of common sense (Murphy 1994: 249-261). How to solve the problem of contradiction of creedal statements about ‘reality’ will present the logical grounds of certain truth-value claims.

Reasoning through religious epistemology is based upon conceptual analysis more than any further interpretation. Hick’s pluralistic argument indicates how the supposition of a universal reason would practically require such a conception of knowledge in its effort to construct a general theory of religion intending to foster inter-religious dialogue (Apaczynski 1992: 40). Dialogue can be a by-product of epistemological evaluation. Great world religious traditions might have a very similar and even same target of how to solve human problems; they primarily attempt to transform the individual’s reality-centeredness. Therefore, while interfaith dialogue aims to global, social and cultural solutions to the world problems, the discussions about
‘reality’ is deeply rooted in metaphysical and epistemological comprehensions.

Hick sets out his pluralistic argument on phenomenological, epistemological and criteriological similarities of religions. In his works, he uses plenty of examples to show that these similarities exist in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism (1977, 1980, 1984, 1987, 1989, 1995a, 1995a-b). In these examples, different religious experiences show that religious people have similar experiences all around the world; therefore there is a common and same ground for the logic of their belief. Hick believes that these people wholeheartedly address their cultural based religious experiences as the true religion that would lead them to the salvation of their human existence without considering other religions, which are trying to do the same thing in different forms (1995a). He argues that differences amongst religions are only in their forms and history. People believe the same "Transcendent Ultimate Reality" and produce divine personae such as Jahweh, Vishnu, Shiva, Heavenly Father, Holy Trinity, Allah or metaphysical impersonae such as Brahman, Nirvana, Sunyata, Dharmakaya, Adoni all within different manifestations. At this point Hick utilises the conceptual analysis to demonstrate that the concept of Ultimate Reality should only mean whatever common interpretation of ‘ultimacy’ is (1989: 9). This requires diminishing different definitions and interpretations such as attributes and appearances of that ultimate existence. Furthermore, it also leaves aside epistemological status of sacred books and revelation in world religions. For example, Pluralism ignores the importance and authority of revelation in Islamic paradigm (Reçber 2005: 3-10).

According to Hick, throughout history human existence has transformed from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness and it can be seen that religions have always involved a socio-cultural background and family inheritance has played a great role in religions. Pre-axial religions that were primitive or archaic had tribal and national characteristics and they were concerned with the basic principals of life and post-axial religions concerned with the salvation of human life (Hick 1989: 21-36). Furthermore pre-axial religions were especially interested in a realistic awareness of suffering, insecurity and mortality, however post-axial religions lead to an understanding of relations between people and the transcendent reality and recognize that people are not perfect.

All post-axial religions as systematic and thematic world religions have teleological and eschatological expectation for future. They seem to reach to an understanding of that life is a process to catch "limitlessly better possibility”. For example, in Hinduism, “in
order to reach liberation through the faithful fulfilment of one's role in society, one must achieve inner detachment. There must be action without concern for the fruits of action" (Hick 1989: 240). We can find similar expectations in Buddhism in which selflessness is a very important personal struggle to reach enlightenment just as Christianity, Judaism and Islam advocate that selfishness as something to be purified and the attachment of the world needs to be reconsidered in order to get fulfilment. However, it is obvious that selflessness has a unique place in Buddhism while the others give a different outlook for the self. The similar conceptualisation of the self or fulfilment should not lead one to think they are all the same and a single way to produce teleology or eschatological expectations.

Post-axial traditions try to show a way of how people can be better in physical and metaphysical aspects. The way of purification of the weights of the world is shown through rituals, customs and good manners. All of these religions produce "golden rules" and "saints" as samples for believers to show how to believe and behave. These golden rules sometimes rule out logic and reasoning. They mostly develop certain mystical language to express their 'reality'. The religious language does not always use the ordinary language to express the description of 'reality'. According to Pluralistic approach, if the specific advice of post-axial traditions is evaluated, different conceptual schemes on a single fundamental theme is observed. However, the main problem here is that whether this single fundamental theme proves all religions have exactly same level of truth-value claims.

Generalisation of religious notions gives a blurred picture. It is generally not denied in metaphysical level that Hinduism tries to escape from egocentrism to divine reality. Brahmans practice to give up all worldly desires and ambitions. Buddhism requires transformation from self-centeredness to reality centeredness. There is great encouragement to change life from ego-domination to a radically God-centeredness in Christianity. Also, Judaism and Islam have similar emphasis for salvation. In pluralistic hypothesis to demonstrate that all these world religions have same objectives. Hence, the efforts for 'reality' create the feeling and motivation to reach to it in the tradition of a religion.

As a core element, Hick thinks that a feeling of the Ultimate Reality leads to reduce selfishness and human desires and leads to a closeness to transcendental reality rather than to physical reality. Thus, it appears to be that this feeling has the same essence in all religions and it has a quite human side of religion. Therefore, people should not blame other religions when they all try to reach same
‘reality’ and they have to tolerate each other because the Real in itself i.e. Real *an sich* is being understood by different human experiences. Hick explains that as follow:

Using the distinction between the Real *an sich* the Real as humanly thought-and-experienced, I want to explore the pluralistic hypothesis that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the real from within the major variant ways of being human and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness is taking place. These traditions are accordingly to be regarded as alternative soteriological 'space' within which, or ways along which, individuals can find salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfilment (1989: 239).

Every religious tradition has its own truth-claims and teaches and preaches to people how to reach the "Truth". Even these traditions have different scriptures, creeds, and etc. but they have the same patterns to demonstrate their truth-claims. Moreover the background of our knowledge is strongly influenced by our tradition and our experiences shaped by this environment.

Basically, Hick utilises Kantinian theory as a ground for his pluralistic theory. Kant denotes that things are as they are in themselves, as opposed to idea that things are knowable by our senses. Kant distinguishes the reality of existence as noumen and phenomena. There are two aspects for something: what it is by itself and how do you see it and something might be different in itself from what one sees or thinks. Different people may see things differently. Kantinian epistemology considers inherent mental concepts, because human mind actively interprets information which appears in the act of human perception (Kant 1993: 211). Hick attempts to distinguish divine as a kind of metaphysical entity and humanly experienced one. This distinction appears to anyone within his/her own distinctive cognitive capacities. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Hick explicitly develops the Kantinian theory itself. Also he - like Kant- postulates for single divine noumenon, category-analogues and defines unknowable divine noumena.

There are lots of different definitions and recognitions of beliefs, religious images and myths. Pluralism asserts that we cannot understand this conflict and we cannot judge any religious faith of whether it is true or not. Therefore no religious claim will remain meaningful to the extent of logical criticism (Hick 1980). The variety of different religious conceptions of divine demonstrates that it is not easy to say something about their accuracy of truth-values and truth-claims and even harder to assess which religion is truer or better than
the others. However, diversity of human understandings of the Divine Reality must not lead to a conflict amongst people (Mullan 1998). Moreover, people must try to understand each other even it is difficult, because there is a serious religious ambiguity. Pluralism offers a solution to this problem through levelling the truth claims and religious epistemologies to just a tradition.

Can there be a universal reason for our religious experience to produce an epistemological ground? It would be appropriate to consider that wholly accepted sense-data about the ‘Real’ is transferred through the categories of our own beliefs and becomes the interpretative element of religious experience. It is clear that this theory defines religious experience like a kind of experience-as. Then, it can be said that the understanding of reality is postulated by our religious concepts, which are experienced by cognitive filters. When someone is born in a certain religious heritage, he or she would be reasonably justified in "choosing" fundamental interpretation of the religion (Capps 1995: 267-300). Then, that person does not seek a ground of rationality and does not try to conclude his external evidence to his acceptance, which is reduced to as a bare logical possibility. Thus, it leads us to be convinced that all different epistemological assumptions, their applications and fundamental beliefs might be equally possible in an essence. If all religious concepts depend on the same epistemological grounds, explanations and experiences of the Real they should be phenomenal, meanwhile there is no explanation about the noumenal source of all our experience. It seems quite obvious that no body is able to prove with sense-data what the noumenal Real (Real an sich) is, but one can and should have an idea and a clear explanation about it. Pluralism mixes scepticism and affirmation together. Its scepticism about truth claims of particular confessions is based on their divergence and upon the ease with which they can be explained as the result of historical and social circumstances (Bryne 1995).

In a logical evaluation, T.R. Mathis criticises Hick's usage of religious experience as an epistemological ground for Pluralism as a very bad analogy. Because, ordinary experience is objective in its character while religious experience is a more subjective one, and there can be no analogy between the two different epistemic objects. According to this criticism, Pluralism asserts that on the one hand, it would amount to intellectual suicide to doubt the indubitable character of the material environment, and on the other hand, that it is possible for one to doubt the veracity of one's religious experience. The present experience of the world lead people to doubt the truth of their claims
(1985: 105), but this may also lead to confusions about epistemic sources and claims about the reality.

One needs to analyse prima facie values and truth claims on the same grounds as they represent the reality. This is the heart of matter in the theory of religious pluralism. It might be commonly accepted that "one would prima facie expect human perceptions of divine reality to be relatively similar, or at least not mutually exclusive, in nature." (Eddy 1994: 467) Paul. R. Eddy criticizes Hick’s hypothesis as a radical neo-Kantian subjectivism. He writes "while he (Hick) allows that purely formal and logically generated properties such as 'being a referent of a term' can legitimately be predicated of divine, it nonetheless 'makes perfectly good sense to say that our substantial concepts do not apply to the Ultimate (470). In his respond to P. Eddy, Hick asserts that Eddy’s failure is to keep clear the distinction between grounds for believing that there is a transcendent divine reality, and reasons for thinking that such a reality is differently conceived, experienced, and responded to from within the different religious traditions (Hick 1995a: 417).

One of the important critics of Pluralism, Gavin D’Costa, raises two major complications for the logical ground of epistemic assertions of Hick’s argument. Initially, the basis of belief in the universal salvific will of the God, which is at the centre of the universe of faiths, requires certain epistemic grounds. When one accepts a creed as a certain ground for her or his beliefs, it is difficult to move it to theocentrism. For instance, in Christianity, salvation is only through the grace of God in Christ and if someone accepts this creed, he has to take all part of the premises without omitting the words; "in Christ", otherwise in this case he can not reach salvation. In Islam, salvation is only through a clear acceptance of the Oneness of God.

Secondly, the objection is about the notion of God. D’Costa argues against reconciling differences of concepts in terms of a model of complementary. It cannot be denied that there may be many contradictories in truth-claims in different creeds and religious arguments. Pluralistic idea only mentions, positive complimentary, and suggests that theistic and non-theistic religions have same validity and equally salvific in truth-value. Amongst other world religions Buddhism remains ‘unresolved problem’ in Buddhist and Advaita Vedanta rejection of God as Ultimate Reality (Coward 2000: 59). According to D’Costa, Pluralism advocates this difficult possibility. Then, if it is the case, what grounds can be asserted that the non-personalist, non-theistic religions are equally authentic and true as the personalist theistic one? (1986). It would be inappropriate to consider a thing by itself and its contradiction by the principle of non-
contradiction. Therefore, believing in something primarily requires accepting that ‘other’ truth claims are not correct with respect to the other. A Buddhist can find himself in a deep agreement, in a particular situation, with another religious person, but this does not mean that he doubts his own truth claim as the only true belief. To reduce the varieties of epistemological grounds and logical problems to only sheer traditional differences as levelled truth-values will not solve the conceptual and logical contradictions of the logic of belief in religions.

Hick recognizes himself as a Christian while he is defined as theocentric Christian (Coward 2000: 59). His position can be interpreted as transcendental agnosticism rather than Christianity. D'Costa rejects this position and he does not accept the distinguishing soteriology from theocentrism and -as his belief- Christocentrism (1987: 183). Final verification about religious beliefs is eschatological and one cannot stay long in any eschatological dilemma unless one prefers many-valued logic or scepticism. Contrary to this, an argument for Pluralism in the aspect of eschatology leads to a sort of eschatological dilemma. It seems that this dilemma is caused by avoiding the logical responsibility of choosing truth claims. Many believers may not avoid the thought of what are similar or contradictory arguments with a critical view of truth on the basis of epistemology to their own religious convictions. However, they would not accept to take the equal risk with their own truth values, which Pluralism requires.

Globalization has a great impact on awareness on diversity and multi-cultural societies which have varieties of religious beliefs. Pluralism is a very important result of globalization (Chris 1999: 29). Furthermore, Hick is accused of being politically motivated; that he uses epistemic liberalism in an ideological way and Pluralism requests no real distinction amongst religions for the sake of tolerance, which will help to establish a New World Order in a secular style. P. Donovan emphasizes on this point when he claims that Pluralism forces people to its truth like any other force for convincing the truth-claims and validity of the argument. "It is clearly one thing to say pluralism is a quest to find the truth, and quite another to say pluralism is the Truth (1993: 229). Inter-religious dialogue has been a very important issue for the history of religions, however, is it the only way for inter-religious dialogue to see all religions as the same reality. While some religions have notion of God who creates, wills, gives the orders, some other religions assert that a personal God does not exist. Is it really true "we may some-how be able to interpret the variety of claims, appearing at times quite contradictory, of the diverse religious
traditions of humanity and still be able to uphold the genuinely religious character of each of these traditions?” (Hick 1989: 44). This will remain a very problematic claim in the theory of Pluralism. Thus, after evaluating the beliefs and truth claims on any epistemological ground, one is expected to choose or find what really is ‘true’. Then, it is highly plausible that one may not be able to uphold more than one religious truth-claim at the same time. It is quite difficult to deal with the questions about the reality of Pluralism while believers continue strongly to hold to their creational references and truth-values for religious arguments.

In conclusion, Hick’s Pluralism tries to establish a new way for interpretation of religion which leads to the acceptance of "Pluralism" as a true understanding of the ‘Real’. He thinks there are equally trustworthy truth claims and arguments in all great religious traditions which are naturally shaped by culture and history, because all of them have a common reference to a single ‘Ultimate Reality’. These religions attempt to show the way to a human salvation which leads to a transformation of self-centredness to the ‘Reality’ centeredness. However, Hick concludes that none of the religions are sufficient to give completely the nature of this Reality and diagnoses cognitive success within the religious experience. Therefore, no one has a right to judge the other’s epistemological ground and logical veracity due to unavoidable relativity in religious arguments. It seems that religions will not have a space for being considered fallible, and believers -even people who kindly tolerate the other religions and live together in peace- will have a great difficulty to believe that other religions are completely true contrary to their own religious arguments. When one is convinced that his or her religious conviction is the Truth and represents the ‘Reality’, how would it be possible to believe at the same time any other epistemological ground is true and the ‘Reality’ is also found there? To doubt a belief is another state of belief. To doubt a truth claim also means that it is not accepted as completely true and not taken as a basis of ‘Reality’. Pluralism asserts that one cannot and does not need to find and choose which religion is true alone, because all cultural-based great world religions have equal trustworthy claims and they all derived from the same ‘Ultimate Reality’. Thus, according to Pluralistic view, a believer cannot believe in the exclusive certainty of his or her own faith and the veracity of logical consistency and truth of her or his religious argument due to the truth claims of other religious people. If he or she agrees with the pluralistic view, the believer will have to accept at the same time the validity and veracity of the arguments of all other world religions.
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