WHAT IS RELIGIOUS PLURALISM?

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The aim of this chapter is to bring some conceptual clarity to the understanding of religious pluralism[1]. Such clarification appears necessary, given conflicting disciplinary usages and slippages between the factual notion of plurality and normative accounts of pluralism. Religious pluralism has at least four different meanings. The first meaning is theological: pluralism assumes that other religious paths are true. The second is sociological: pluralism simply means religious plurality or diversity. In the third, pluralism is a philosophical school, what is known as value-pluralism in which values are irreducibly plural. Value-pluralism is not per se about religion, but can lead to a philosophical argument for valuing diversity intrinsically. Finally, a fourth conception of religious pluralism refers to a political ideal of peaceful interaction among individuals and groups of different religious faiths, as well as non-believers. This paper sets out these four models.

THEOLOGICAL PLURALISM

The first meaning of religious pluralism is theological. In Christian thought, pluralistic theologies assume that other religions might be equally true[2]. Pluralism contrasts with two other related categories, namely exclusivism and inclusivism. Exclusivists believe that there is only one true faith and only one way to salvation. In its Catholic version, the idea is captured by the old Latin phrase "*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*", i.e. "outside the Church there is no salvation." Its Protestant counterpart emphasizes personal belief in Jesus Christ as the only path to salvation. Salvation, in this view, can only be attained through the Christian church or the Christian faith.

Exclusivism has been challenged by inclusivism. Inclusivists also assume that there is one true religious faith and one path to salvation, but believe that non-Christians might be saved through the Christian path. The concept of "anonymous Christians" captures the idea that people who have never heard of Christ might still have an "implicit" faith in the real God. In this view, God probes all human hearts, Christian or otherwise, and learns who these anonymous

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1 I thank the editors of this volume for their useful contribution to the final draft of this chapter.

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2 I focus on the specific case of Christianity that has been much documented. Similar debates may have occurred in other religious traditions but remain less visible in the English-speaking literature. Much work remains to be done to shed light on the way different religious traditions relate to religious plurality. See John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982); John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981); John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987); John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985); Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

Christians are[3]. Devout Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or even atheists, can therefore be saved through the Christian faith.

Pluralism differs from both exclusivism and inclusivism insofar as it questions the "myth of uniqueness"[4]. There is no such thing as one true faith or a unique path to salvation. Pluralists do not assert that all religions have equal worth, but assume that other religious traditions could have a salvific potential. Interreligious dialogue is a way to learn more about the religious truths present in other religions.

Pluralistic theologies developed in the Christian tradition especially between the 1970s and 1990s. There are different types of theological pluralism. Some pluralists argue that there is a fundamental unity among religious traditions. One of the most important defenders of such unitary pluralism, and perhaps the most controversial, is the philosopher of religion, John Hick. According to Hick, religions are different cognitive responses to the same Ultimate Reality. They are different phenomenal manifestations of the same noumenon[5]. Believers from different faiths can therefore engage together in truth-seeking dialogue. Since there is ultimately one religious truth, they can learn from each other's imperfect religious knowledge. More cautiously, the theologian Raimundo Panikkar postulates the incommensurability of different religious paths[6]. There is no such thing as a common denominator shared by the world religions. But even without a common Ultimate Reality, dialogue is possible insofar as believers recognize the authenticity of the religious faith of others. What matters most is not the content of beliefs, but the sincerity of the

faith. Interreligious dialogue becomes interfaith dialogue[7].

Thus, the theological meaning of religious pluralism refers to a certain attitude towards religious plurality. It is a religious response to the fact of diversity that calls for an equal recognition of religious difference. Yet pluralistic theologies have been very controversial and received a fair amount of criticism within Christian circles[8].

SOCIOLOGICAL "PLURALISM" OR PLURALITY

The second meaning of religious pluralism is sociological[9]. Pluralism refers here to the social phenomenon of religious plurality or diversity. This is an empirical fact, or rather a dynamic of pluralization, that deserves to be described and explained. To avoid any confusion, such sociological pluralism should be referred to as plurality.

Religious plurality is not a new phenomenon[10]. In pre-reformation Europe, the Catholic Church was already dealing with "infidels" (Jews and Muslims), and the Orthodox Church of Eastern Europe.

3 This controversial idea of "anonymous Christians" was introduced by the German Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner (1904-1984).

4 Hick and Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions.*

5 Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent.*

6 Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue.*

7 Interfaith dialogue often includes non-religious beliefs, such as agnostic or atheist views. Such opinions are interpreted as specific kinds of faith.

8 See Gavin D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990).

9 Sociological pluralism (or "plurality") refers here to a descriptive account of diversity. This does not imply that all sociologists use the notion in a purely descriptive fashion. James Beckford, for example, is critical of the conflation between descriptive and normative usages of "pluralism" in sociology. As a matter of "conceptual hygiene", he writes, "it is preferable to associate 'pluralism' with ideological and normative positions". See James A. Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 79.

10 Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

In a context of superposition between religious and political entities, "heresy" was perceived as a crime against the political body, and the struggle against heretics was fierce. One group of dissidents succeeded in establishing themselves, namely the Hussites of Bohemia, in the fifteenth century. The subsequent reformations of the sixteenth century brought about unforeseen religious divisions – not only, that is, between Catholics and Protestants but also within Protestantism itself. Protestantism was soon divided into rival congregations, such as Lutherans, Reformed (or "Calvinists"), and Anabaptists. This new diversity shows how religious disagreements and cleavages frequently cut across religious traditions.

The sociological phenomenon of religious pluralism has acquired new scope in recent decades, both in Western Europe and the United States[11]. This religious diversity encompasses not only Christians, Jews, and Muslims, but also non-Abrahamic religions, such as Hindus, Buddhists, new religious movements and, of course, a growing number of non-believers[12]. Globalization and migration play a significant role in the pluralization of Western societies. Through these processes, modernity has not led to the disappearance of religion, as some theories of secularization predicted, but to a deep plurality. Not only do various religions coexist but religion itself undergoes a process of internal pluralization. French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger speaks of "exploded religion" (*religion éclatée*) in order to describe this contemporary religious landscape[13]. In it, religion becomes increasingly subjectivized and individual believers tend to come up with their own *bricolage* — they pick and choose what they find appealing in different religions[14]. This process of customization of religion reflects what Peter Berger calls the "heretical imperative", namely the prominent place of "choice" in modern beliefs[15]. In these ways, many sociologists argue that modernity and pluralization go hand in hand. As Charles Taylor puts it:

> the present scene, shorn of the earlier forms, is different and unrecognizable to any earlier epoch. It is marked by an unheard of pluralism of outlooks, religious and non- and anti-religious, in which the number of possible positions seems to be increasing without end[16].

The question of religious plurality becomes more complex when one considers not only the diversity of religious traditions, but also the variety of religious movements within and outside these traditions, as well the diversity of unbeliefs. Some religions are monotheist, others polytheist, and some are Godless. There is even some doubt about the relevance of the concept of religion to encompass all these phenomena[17]. Religious plurality is not only about the one and the many, it is a multifaceted diversity that requires constant interpretation.

11 Thomas F. Banchoff, *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

12 The question of the inclusion of non-believers within the concept of religious plurality is an interesting one. Here I include also non-religious beliefs (such as atheism and agnosticism). Even if they are arguably not religious per se, they define themselves in relation to religion.

13 Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Le Pélerin et le converti: la religion en mouvement*. (Paris: Flammarion, 1999): 29.

14 *Ibid.*, 18.

15 *Hairesis* in Greek means choice. See Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1979).

16 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007): 437.

17 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 1991). See chapter 2: "'Religion' in the West".

PHILOSOPHICAL PLURALISM

The third meaning of pluralism is philosophical. In liberal political theory, diversity can be envisaged either as a *fact* or as an *instrumental value*[18]. On the one hand, the liberal state must ensure that diversity does not threaten the stability of the system. When John Rawls speaks about "the fact of pluralism", he is referring to the sociological phenomenon[19]. He could be speaking about plurality instead. However, he gives a specific interpretation of pluralism, through the idea of reasonable pluralism. Reasonable pluralism refers to the irreducible diversity of religious, moral, and philosophical comprehensive doctrines, both incompatible and reasonable[20]. Diversity (including religious diversity) is envisaged as a natural consequence of the exercise of autonomous reason

in a democratic regime. For Rawls, autonomy and diversity are compatible and complementary. The valorization of autonomy by liberalism provides the conditions for diversity to thrive. On the other hand, diversity is instrumentally valued by some liberals because it benefits individuals and society. John Stuart Mill, for example, argues that the diversity of opinions and beliefs serves the quest for truth. In addition, the variety of ways of life is linked to the development of individuality which is crucial to social progress. We have good instrumental reasons, according to Mill, to value diversity[21].

There is, however, a third way between a factual account and an instrumental defense of diversity. Philosophical pluralism values diversity *intrinsically*. Pluralism here is a theory of value — value-pluralism — whose metaphysical assumptions are contested. This kind of pluralism contrasts with monism, the idea that values can be harmonized in a unified system or reduced to a common denominator. According to Isaiah Berlin, pluralism is:

> the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving lights from each other, as we derive from reading Plato or the novels of medieval Japan — worlds, outlooks, very remote from our own[22].

In this view, pluralism differs from a vulgar relativism (or subjectivism) which would say: "I prefer coffee, you prefer champagne. We have different tastes. There is no more to be

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18 William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 27. Galston associates the first with John Rawls and the second with John Stuart Mill and James Madison.

19 John Rawls, *Political liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

20 Rawls does not define reasonableness as such, but he does specify some aspects of a "reasonable person" (*Ibid.*, 48-63). One aspect is the willingness of individuals to propose and abide by principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation, to the extent that others reciprocate. Another aspect is the readiness of individuals to recognize and accept the consequences of the burdens of judgment. Burdens of judgment are the reasons why reasonable and sincere persons disagree on moral, religious, or philosophical issues (Rawls, *Political liberalism*, 56-57): (1) Evidence is conflicting and complex and therefore hard to assess and evaluate; (2) We disagree about the weight that should be given to the same considerations; (3) Conceptual indeterminacy forces us to rely on differing judgments and interpretations; (4) Our assessment of evidence depends upon our life experience (position in society, ethnicity, etc.); (5) There are different normative considerations to both sides of an issue; (6) Some selection of values must be made since a system of social institution is limited in the values it can admit. Because of the burdens of judgment, the careful use of reason does not lead to the same conclusions. Reasonable persons hold different comprehensive doctrines and pluralism prevails.

21 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). See "On Liberty", chapter 3: "Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-being".

22 Isaiah Berlin and Henry Hardy, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Murray, 1990): 11.

said"[23]. Contrary to relativism thus construed, pluralism asserts that values are objective, and that humans pursue them as ends in themselves. Such values can be in conflict, which means that they are incompatible with each other and incommensurable. As a result, "[we] are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss"[24]. The choice between incompatible values implies a moral cost.

For Joseph Raz, autonomy is intimately linked to pluralism[25]. Autonomy indeed requires the possibility to choose between a diversity of worthwhile choices. William Galston, on the other hand, argues that liberalism should not be centrally concerned with autonomy, but rather with "the protection of legitimate diversity"[26]. A diverse society is one where individuals can choose freely among a plurality of conceptions of the good life. Diversity provides the necessary conditions for the exercise of autonomy, but also for "expressive liberty" which allows individuals and groups to lead their lives in conformity with their convictions, although these convictions do not always reflect the value of autonomy[27].

Value-pluralism concerns first of all goods, and not ways of life, cultures, or religions[28]. However, the metaphysical premise of an irreducible plurality of value can easily be translated into a principle of "respect for plurality" insofar as it reflects the plurality of goods[29]. George Crowder adds that pluralism should not only value the diversity of cultures, but diversity within cultures, insofar as it favors autonomy. If value-pluralism is not properly speaking about religion, it can justify a normative position in favor of the valorization of diversity, including religious diversity[30].

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AS A POLITICAL IDEAL

In its fourth sense, pluralism does not take a theological stance about religious truth, nor does it make a metaphysical claim about the nature of value. Pluralism is also not to be confused with mere plurality or diversity. Rather, it refers to a political ideal of peaceful interaction of individuals and groups of different religious traditions and confessions, as well as non-believers. Pluralism portrays a world that has moved "beyond mere toleration" toward the active engagement with religious difference.

How does pluralism relate to toleration? Toleration can be understood in many different ways[31]. Let us define it quite narrowly as an attitude of self-restraint when confronted with beliefs or behaviors judged to be reprehensible. To be tolerant is to refrain from acting to eradicate what is perceived as wrong. Toleration presupposes some kind of moral judgment, but accepts a resignation in the face of evil. This kind of toleration leads, at best, to peaceful coexistence. By contrast, the pluralistic attitude points to recognition and promotes the enthusiastic endorsement of difference. Difference should not be deplored, but celebrated as a facet of the inherent diversity of a free society.

23 *Ibid.*, 11.

24 *Ibid.*, 16.

25 Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford [Oxfordshire]: Clarendon Press, 1986).

26 Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice*, 23.

27 *Ibid.*, 28.

28 George Crowder, "Two Concepts of Liberal Pluralism", *Political Theory* 35 (2007): 133.

29 *Ibid.,*132

30 See Michael Jinkins, *Christianity, Tolerance, and Pluralism: A Theological Engagement with Isaiah Berlin's Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 2004).

31 According to Michael Walzer, several attitudes can be encompassed under the umbrella of toleration, ranging from mere resignation to enthusiasm. I believe that the enthusiastic endorsement of differences should no longer be labeled toleration, but rather a pluralistic attitude. See Michael Walzer, *On Toleration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997): 10-11.

Here, pluralism goes beyond toleration — that leads to mere coexistence — to refer to active engagement across boundaries of faith — interfaith cooperation.

This understanding of religious pluralism is consistent with the definition of Courtney Bender and Pamela Klassen, namely as "a commitment to recognize and understand others across perceived or claimed lines of religious differences"[32]. It is also very close to Thomas Banchoff *et al.'s* definition in which religious pluralism refers to "patterns of peaceful interaction among diverse religious actors — individuals and groups who identify with, and act out of, particular religious traditions"[33]. Why speak of "peaceful" interaction? Because, says Banchoff, the ideal of religious pluralism "ends where violence begins"[34]. Such conceptions of religious pluralism do not contradict the fact that religious plurality pertains to differences, disagreements, and conflicting interests. Pluralism does not deny the existence of strong controversies within religions, between religions, and between religions and the secular; instead, pluralism poses an ideal of the regulation of conflicts through peaceful interaction.

32 Courtney Bender and Pamela E. Klassen, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010): 2.

33 Thomas F. Banchoff, *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 4.

34 *Ibid.*, 5.

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Question: "What is religious pluralism?". Answer: Religious pluralism generally refers to the belief in two or more religious worldviews as being equally valid or acceptable. More than mere tolerance, religious pluralism accepts multiple paths to God or gods as a possibility and is usually contrasted with "exclusivism," the idea that there is only one true religion or way to know God. While religious pluralism has been in existence since at least the seventeenth century, the concept has become more popular since the latter half of the twentieth century in Western Europe and North Ame