

Does God Have Many Names?

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Abstract—It is a controversial topic about “God”, people always argue if God has many names or there are many Gods on the earth, if there is God what does it look like, if we believe God, what it means for us. This article tries to use a critical thinking to discuss religious pluralism in contemporary world.

Keywords-religious pluralism; diversity; God

I. INTRODUCTION

It is always a controversial thesis that if God has many names or there are many Gods on the earth, if there is God what does it look like, if we believe God, what it means for us. And the answer is always diverse. For example, Spinoza claimed that God is a single substance within which all is contained; Hegel regarded God is the “Absolute Spirit”; but Karl Marx who doesn’t believe God thought religion is opium of the people; and as well Freud regarded religion was illusion, etc...Besides this, even the group of people who think

there is God in the world still have a lot of attitudes to treat it. Some philosophers and scholars especially theologians always regard only one is the true and the way to be connect to God, such as Karl Barth who regard only Christian is the way to be connect to God. But there are also some scholars or religious people regard there is many religions but only their own direct to God, the others need to approach God through them, one of the famous representative is Karl Rahner; besides of the two, there is another kind of group which regard there are many ways to God, and they are equal to each other, one of the famous representative is John Hick. So does God really have many names? Or actually there is only one true religious to God or even there are many Gods on the earth is puzzling people or making people debate all the time. And what I want to discuss here is my opinion to treat religious diversity.

II. THE MEANING OF “GOD” IN DIFFERENT RELIGIONS

But before I talk about the attitude of the religious diversity, I will briefly introduce about the meaning of “God” in different religions. There are so many religions in the world, and here I list the main religions which locate in different areas of the world.

For Christianity, the central tenet of Christianity is the belief in Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah (Christ). Christians believe that Jesus, as the Messiah, was anointed by God as savior of humanity, and hold that Jesus’ coming

was the fulfillment of messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. The Christian concept of the Messiah differs significantly from the contemporary Jewish concept. The core Christian belief is that through belief in and acceptance of the death and resurrection of Jesus, sinful humans can be reconciled to God and thereby are offered salvation and the promise of eternal life.¹

For Islam, Muslims believe that God is one and incomparable and the purpose of existence is to love and serve God.² Muslims also believe that Islam is the complete and universal version of a primordial faith that was revealed at many times and places before, including through Abraham, Moses and Jesus, whom they consider prophets.

For Buddhism, there is no “God” in Buddhism concept, the foundations of Buddhist tradition and practice are the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings), and the Sangha (the community).

For Daoism, there is also no “God”, if we need to add the name for it, it must be the “Dao”. In this spirit, the universe is seen as being in a constant process of re-creating itself, as everything that exists is a mere aspect of qi, which, “condensed, becomes life; diluted, it is indefinite potential”. Qi is in a perpetual transformation between its condensed and diluted state. These two different states of qi, on the other hand, are embodiments of the abstract entities of yin and yang; two complimentary extremes that constantly play against and with each other and cannot exist without the other. (Robinet, Isabelle. 1997)

We can easy to find that the Ultimate Reality or the Truth of all the religions is different. And later the difference caused the different attitude towards the religious diversity and also aroused the discourse that what is the true religion to the GOD.

III. THREEFOLD PARADIGM OF CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

So now I just simply describe about the threefold paradigm of Christian responses to religious diversity.

Firstly, exclusivism relates salvation exclusively to one particular tradition. According to this definition, salvation is limited to one special group, while the rest of mankind being either left in the hell or explicitly excluded from the sphere of salvation. The most obvious and influential

¹ Metzger/Coogan, *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp. 513, 649.

² Quran 51:56

expression of this idea appeared in the Catholic dogma *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church, no salvation). On the one hand, if salvation consists of a change of state from the original sin to forgiveness made possible by Christ's sacrifice on the cross, then this salvation can be seen naturally as limited to the Christian faith community. On the other hand, if salvation is understood as the actual transformation of human life from self-centredness to Reality-centredness, this is not necessarily restricted within the boundaries of any one historical tradition. Now there is a fairly widespread belief that there is something seriously wrong with exclusivism. Usually, these criticisms come from the following aspects. Morally speaking, religious exclusivism has the result of making those who have the knowledge of unique religion to be religious elites, while punishing those who happen to have no access to the correct religious view. The exclusivists are ethnically arrogant. They always think their own religion is the only real one, which is superior to others. However, they seldom carry any deep study of, or dialogue with other religions. Epistemically, exclusivism is narrow-minded and irrational, and the exclusivists only stare at on "tree", but lost sight of the whole "forest". Each religion, viewed as a historical process spanning many centuries, is a unique mixture of virtues and vices. There are no evidences or criterions to prove that certain religion is superior or advanced than the rest. Moreover, if each religion claims that its own salvation road is the most efficient and real, then it will look down upon others. Inevitably, this will be harmful to the whole religious dialogue and communication. In the past history, because of restricted conditions of every aspect, it is understandable that Christian people overlooked non-Christian community.

Secondly, since exclusivism is facing so many challenges, many scholars have moved to inclusivism. Inclusivism, on the one hand, in common with exclusivism, holds that there is one absolute way for salvation that can be realized in only one religion. The way of salvation is open to people only because they meet special criteria revealed in one true religion. On the other hand, inclusivism, in common with pluralism, holds that God can be encountered and his grace manifested in various ways through diverse religions. Everyone can experience salvation, regardless of whether they have heard and acknowledged the basic doctrines of the one true religion. This is the soft inclusivism. Inclusivism extends beyond exclusivism, although it makes exclusive claims for the absolute truth of one religion, it admits that adherents of other religions can be saved. Both forms of inclusivism involve certain inner strains and certain awkward implications. The theologian Karl Rahner argues that persons can be saved only because a particular salvific event has occurred. Christianity is an absolute religion to provide the way of salvation. To realize this salvation, Jesus Christ died on the cross for all humans. God desires that all persons can be saved, and can apply the results of Jesus' atoning to all human beings even to those who have never heard of Jesus or have never acknowledged his teaching still can be saved. Rahner calls these persons "anonymous Christians" because they lack an explicit

Christian faith; they consciously or unconsciously seek and worship God. This method can be applied to inclusivist advocates in other religions.

Thirdly, when faced with the indisputable fact of diversity, those who conclude that the various major world religions should be viewed as roughly of co-equal soteric or truth value are known today as pluralists. The general claim of religious pluralism is that both truth and salvation are available in a variety of the world's religions. The definition of religious pluralism is required to be both general enough to cover the variety of pluralist models and specific enough to distinguish it from some of the radical inclusivism. According to this principle, the following definition is satisfactory: the view that most religions function as salvific paths toward Ultimate reality on their own terms and apart from any other religious system.³ It is not only important to distinguish pluralism from "exclusivism" and "inclusivism" on the one side, but also from "relativism" on the other side. Pluralists differ from the pure relativists in that they retain a place for some sort of inter-religious evaluation.

IV. ATTITUDE TOWARDS PLURALISM

Possibly there are not so much controversial issues in the first two types, because each religion just claim their own is the true ultimate reality. But the most challenging issue, which faces adherents of the pluralist model, involves the conflicting truth-claims of different world religions. The problem is this: if all the great world religions are roughly equal in terms of their soteriological efficiency and religious truth, how does one explain the fact that their various conceptions of ultimate reality are so different, sometimes even contradictory in essence? So the success of a pluralism model depends on whether it can provide a convincing answer to this puzzle. Various scholars have various attitudes to explain this question.

I believe there must be a group of people have the positive attitude towards religious pluralism, the fact is as well. Because some people think there are many ways to God, but the Eternal One is the same, but because different religious community have different culture, history, geography, climate and economic background, so the form of Eternal One is also different. So we can try to use a friendly attitude to treat each religious tradition, to get along with different religious person, and to share each understanding of God, the attitude is religious pluralism. Just as John Hick mentioned in his book "Among Semitic peoples therefore, whose traditions are those of herdsmen, the sacred is thought of in male terms: God the father. Among Indian peoples whose tradition has been for many centuries, and even millennia, agricultural, it is in female terms that the sacred is understood: God the mother."⁴ Again, as has been pointed out by Martin Prozesky, the Canaanites, and other ancient Near Eastern cultures with a comparable

³ Eddy Paul Rhodes, 2002, *John Hick's Pluralist Philosophy of World Religions*, Abingdon UK, & Brookfield, Vermont USA: Ashfield, p15

⁴ Trevor Ling, 1968, *A History of religion, East and West*, London: Macmillan & Co., p146

mythology, worshiped a sky god (Baal) and an earth goddess (Anath), whereas the ancient Egyptians, in contrast, had a sky goddess (Nut) and an earth god (Geb). Why was Egypt different in this respect? Is it not because Egypt is in the exceptional position that the fertilizing waters, male by analogy, come from the earth, in the form of the river Nile, whereas in the other countries they come from the sky in the form of rain? Now one could, as I mentioned earlier, react to this kind of evidence by concluding that the belief in God is entirely a human projection, guided by cultural influences. But the alternative interpretation is that there is some genuine awareness of the divine, but that the concrete form which it takes is provided by cultural factors. On this view these different human awarenesses of the Eternal One represent different culturally conditioned perceptions of the same infinite divine reality.”⁵

However, there are also another group people have the negative attitude towards religious pluralism. Some of them criticize that we should not try to use a common ground to erase the particularity and personality of each religion. Such as Lindbeck said: A religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and /or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought....Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities.... A religion is above all an external word, a *verbum externum* that molds and shapes the self and its world, rather than an expression or thematization of a preexisting self or of preconceptual experience. (Lindbeck 1984, 33-34) So, religions are like languages which form experience not experience search for language. If we don't have the same religion we cannot have the same experience, we are different in ultimate reality. And Lindbeck also mentioned: an inner experience of God common to all human beings and all religions. There can be no experiential core because, so the argument goes, the experiences that religions evoke and mold are as varied as the interpretative schemes they embody. Adherents of different religions do not diversely thematize the same experience; rather they have different experiences (Lindbeck 1984, 40). And if we use anthropologists view to look at pluralism, each society has its own filter, its own worldview, and if we could only enter into that culture we would realize that it functions much more effectively and adequately than we on the outside can imagine. Each filter must be judged within its own context, according to the needs of its own world; we cannot use the filter of one culture to evaluate—or to denigrate—another. To hold up some universal standard of reason or logic by which we can judge all cultures is to think, naively and dangerously, that we can have a “filterless take” on the world. Thus, the diversity of filters wins out over the possibility of a universal filter.⁶ So the religious diversity cannot be reduced to one foundation.

And some of them criticize the religious pluralism could

⁵ John Hick. 1982. *God Has Many Names*. The Westminster Press.p51-52

⁶ Paul F. Knitter. 1995. *One Earth Many Religions*. Maryknoll, NewYork .p40

become imperialism. As Paul F. Knitter mentioned in his book that: 1. they too quickly presuppose or describe the common ground that establishes unity among religions. 2. They too easily draw up common guidelines for dialogue among the religions.⁷ And also William Placher reminds his pluralist friends that by insisting on nonabsolute positions they can become quite absolutist, and by insisting on all-inclusion they can end up being exclusive. The danger is that pluralists will close themselves to those who close themselves to other. They end up with a seemingly smug viewpoint: “I announce that I am willing to take your point of view seriously. If you are not willing to do the same, then I am ‘open’ and you are ‘closed’, so it turns out that I do not have to take your point of view seriously”. (Placher 1989, 64)

In my opinion, all of the controversial voices almost focus on whether One God has many names or actually there is different Ultimate Reality, but never deny the existence of God.

V. CONCLUSION

So, I think for the people who have no deep religious believes but much care about religious problems especially relationship beyond different religions are easy to accept the opinion of religious pluralism. But for the other people who have the devout religious believe maybe regard this opinion is wrong as it doesn't consider comprehensively how each religion treat them as. For example, John Hick uses the metaphor of taking the part of the whole to describe each religion just as a blind touched one part of the elephant, and regarded the part as the whole. But John Hick seems as the outside observer in the context. So how people can be easy to accept his opinion? He also thinks religion is as a person who is climbing a mountain, each religion just tries to arrive the same mountain from different direction, so when they up to the mountaintop, they will find each of them is not opposite. But the question is if actually they are climbing different mountain at all?

Therefore, I agree with part of the opinion that religious pluralism is a good way to promote different religions communicating with each other, but I don't think the goal of religious pluralism is recognize the only one Ultimate Reality. Religions are the form or methods to teach people how to find their own truth, just as the fingers point to the moon, we have many ways to point it such as point to the moon in the sky, point to the moon in the water or even point to the moon in our picture, but the final aim or purpose is the moon. We no need fight nor have conflict not because of the wisdom but forms. And I think religious pluralism is a way to let different religions understand each other, learn each other, share with each other and finally respect and recognize each other in a multicultural context, and to be harmony as well.

If God has many names, no matter what name is it, the Ultimate Reality is the same; if there are many God in the world, it means we have many ways to find the Ultimate

⁷ Paul F. Knitter. 1995. *One Earth Many Religions*. Maryknoll, NewYork .p44

Reality; if there is no God in the world, religions still give people a chance to be good. So whatever the God looks like or no God, the existence of different religions still have the significant meaning for us. Why people cannot have friendly attitude to understand different religions? So I hope what people can understand is not the name of God but the real wisdom of God.

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