

# RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION

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## **1. Introduction**

Our world today is highly diverse and pluralistic, with a wide range of cultures and lifestyles, philosophies, and belief systems. Yet, we also experience the interconnections, the overlapping of cultures, rationalities and beliefs. It is not difficult to see the extremely intricate interconnectedness of human life across the planet and the oneness of humanity. The consciousness of human interconnectedness is changing the way we construct our identities and orient ourselves toward life in the world. Today, neither people nor institutions can avoid contact or knowledge of some cultures. Whether people accept, reject, or modify the concepts or values which they encounter from other societies and cultures, whatever they do will greatly affect their identities and the way they look at their own identities.

The same could be said about religion. Although there may still be some religions that attempt to close themselves from the influence of other religions, they cannot remain either indifferent or exclusive. Religion significantly influences our understanding and all human affairs. The fact of religious diversity leads us to religious pluralism, and this, in turn, to a call for religious freedom. I want to argue that, if we take religious freedom seriously, and if we also take a gentler and more accommodating stance regarding our religious convictions and look at the other religions with understanding, openness, and respect, then, the practice of religion need not be, as it often has been, a reason or cause of violence.

## **2. Religion and Truth**

No institution has exercised as profound a role and has affected human history as has religion. History reveals the pervasive influence of religion on human understanding and human affairs. Among others, religion offers

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a comprehensive explanation of the universe and man's place in it. It tells man where he came from, where he is at the moment, where he is going, and how he can get there.<sup>1</sup> Religion has been used to legitimize social and political mores, rituals, practices, moral standards, and norms of every human community. Nevertheless, it is also a concept that escapes uniformity of understanding, so that arriving at a common definition of religion is almost impossible.

Religion is also a source of many values. It gives man reasons for living, for striving and for committing himself to a higher level of existence. It gives man a sense of dignity and self-worth; it gives man something to hope for, something to believe in, and some sense to those things that are beyond his comprehension. It gives man comfort in sorrow, courage in danger, and joy amidst despair.<sup>2</sup> However, from religion sprung various feelings and emotions, sentiments and reasons.

Certainly, religion holds power over humanity and has inspired a great number of individuals – from teachers to artists, from soldiers to writers, from subjects to leaders. It has created saints and martyrs and moved men to write about their beliefs, to act according to their faith and to offer their lives for their faith; and, thus, it has ignited countless reformations and revolutions.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, it has been the cause of much of the bloodshed and violence throughout human history. From time immemorial, many wars were fought on some religious ground or because of differences in religious beliefs. Many of the violent acts were perpetuated in the name of religion.<sup>4</sup>

Although it is quite difficult to establish what religion is, given the differences among religions, there are a number of characteristics common to all of them. First, there is a reference to a supernatural order and a supernatural being, through which the fundamental aspects of human life are explained and evaluated; religions recognize the sacred or supernatural realm from which the supernatural being and forces operate. From this reference to the supernatural, there is a corresponding subjective disposition towards the supernatural order; a feeling of dependence, of

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<sup>1</sup>Louis P. Pojman ed., *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1994, xi.

<sup>2</sup>Pojman ed., *Philosophy of Religion*.

<sup>3</sup>Pojman ed., *Philosophy of Religion*.

<sup>4</sup>Jove Jim S. Aguas, "Promoting Human Dignity in a Culture of Violence," *Philosophy, Culture and Traditions* 3 (2005), 63.

awe, of admiration and love, a sense of mystery, a sense of guilt and fear, and a sense of moral obligation towards the supernatural being. It is common to religions to practise ritual acts around the supernatural being or beings and the sacred objects associated with the divine; prayers, sacrifices and other forms of communication with the supernatural or divine; these rituals are used to establish the right relationship with the divine. A system of ethics and a moral code are believed to be sanctioned by the supreme being. Every religion has a particular world-view which provides a stable context within which each person is able to relate himself to others, the world and to the divine. This world-view not only fixes the relationship of God or the gods with men and nature, but organizes social life.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond these commonalities, however, is a vast array of diversities – in doctrines, beliefs, teaching, practices, norms, and so on. These diversities have frequently resulted in misunderstandings, conflicts and, worse, chaos and violence.

The major religions (like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism) have claimed truth and validity about their beliefs and doctrines. Yet while each religion claims a relation to and an inspiration from one divine and ultimate Reality, their teachings, doctrines and norms embody different truths and different commitments. Hence, one might well ask: Which of them is true and the right path towards salvation and happiness?

The philosophical question of the relation of religion and truth has resulted in three basic positions: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

Exclusivism holds that there is only one true religion which is the way to God and to salvation. Though there are truths in other religions, the basic claims about the nature of God and salvation or liberation are contraries that they cannot be all possibly true. So, one set of claims and one religion is exclusively true; it alone describes the way to salvation or liberation. The Catholic Church, asserting divine revelation as one of the sources of its faith, has claimed exclusivity in the past.

Inclusivism agrees with the exclusivism that the absolute provision for salvation is revealed in one religion. However, God might reveal himself or act graciously in various ways in a variety of places and times that makes salvation available to all. Hence, people can encounter God and

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<sup>5</sup>*The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 1967 edition, s.v. "Religion," by William P. Alston, 141-142.

receive God's grace in diverse religions; adherents of other religions can be saved because of persons or events specified by the true religion, though without knowing anything about the religion that embodies the objective provision for salvation.

Pluralism in general holds that all religions – like Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism – are different paths to the same God or Ultimate Reality. The Holy and Divine is beyond our finite capacity to understand and individual religions are the earthly appearances of God's presence or interpretations of God. The religious pluralist, therefore, contends that man must abandon the claim to exclusivity and accept the thesis that many paths lead to God and to salvation.

### **3. Religious Pluralism**

The prevailing attitude today is pluralism. Given the diversity of cultures and traditions in the world, it is important that each culture is recognized and respected in order to attain harmony and peace in a world perceived to be violent and intolerant. In the religious sphere, religious pluralism is the most viable and acceptable position since it offers ways to avoid conflict among the major religions and could be a ground for dialogue and harmony.

Religious pluralism in its broad sense holds that no religion can claim sole authority to teach absolute truth. Given the finite and fallible nature of human beings, no religious text written by man can absolutely describe God, God's will, or God's counsel, since it is God apart from man who reveals the divine thoughts, intentions, and volition perfectly.<sup>6</sup>

Religious pluralists point out that nearly all religious texts are an assortment of human observations presented, for example, as historical narratives, poetry, essays, and plays. The religious text, therefore, is open to interpretation. Although all religions attempt to capture reality, their attempts occur within particular cultural and historical contexts that affect the writer's viewpoint.<sup>7</sup> In this light, no religion is able to comprehensively capture and communicate all truth.

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<sup>6</sup>“Religious Pluralism,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious\\_pluralism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_pluralism) (29 March 2006).

<sup>7</sup>“Religious Pluralism,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious\\_pluralism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_pluralism).

Since men have different perceptions of the ultimate reality, they express different interpretations. The Buddhist parable of six blind men illustrates this point.

Once upon a time, a group of religious seekers from different traditions came together and began to discuss the nature of God. Offering quite different answers, they began quarrelling among themselves as to who was right and who was wrong. Finally, when no hope for reconciliation was in sight, they called in the Buddha and ask him to tell them who was right. The Buddha proceeded to tell them a story.

“There was once a king, who asked his servants to bring him all the blind people in town and an elephant. Six blind men and an elephant were set before him. The king instructed the blind men to feel the elephant and describe it. “An elephant is like a large water pot,” said the one who touched the elephant’s head. “Your majesty, he is wrong,” said the second who touched an ear. “An elephant is like a fan.” “No,” insisted a third, “an elephant is like a snake,” as he held its trunk. “On the contrary, you are mistaken,” said a fourth as he held the tusks, “an elephant is like two prongs of a plough.” The fifth man demurred and said, “it is quite clear that an elephant is like a pillar,” as he grasped the animal’s rear legs. “You are all mistaken,” insisted the sixth. “An elephant is like a long snake,” and he held up the tail. Then they all began to shout at each other about their convictions of the nature of an elephant.”

After the Buddha told the story, he commented, “how can you be so sure of what you cannot see? We are all like blind people in this world. We cannot see God. Each of you may be partly right, yet none completely so.”

Believers in religious pluralism hold that their own particular belief system is ‘true’. They believe that their religion is the most complete and accurate interpretation of the divine, but they also accept that other religions teach many truths about the nature of God and man, and that it is possible to establish a significant amount of common ground across all belief systems.

Some pluralists respond that religion does not make ultimate truth claims and, hence, there is no problem with diverse religious traditions.

The sole concern of religion is to make life meaningful.<sup>8</sup> Other pluralists hold that religious concepts express not the divine reality itself, but man's attempt to understand this divine reality. Religious concepts are not literal descriptions of this reality, they simply express how this reality appears to man – they are simply man's attempt to understand the divine reality.<sup>9</sup>

Many religious pluralists claim that members of other faiths are searching for truth in different ways, and that human fallibility limits all religious knowledge. Despite these limitations, religious pluralism does not preclude individual thought or participation in rituals or spiritual experimentation with any particular religion or community; rather, such worshippers practise according to personal traditions, preferences, and community norms, while recognizing a host of practices or interpretations by others.<sup>10</sup> The religious pluralist, therefore, contends that man must abandon the claim to exclusivity and accept the thesis that many paths lead to God and to salvation. Each major religion has been a different interpretation of the same Ultimate Reality, to same salvation; they are different paths to the same reality.<sup>11</sup> As Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* says: “However men approach me, even so do I accept them: for on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine.”<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. John Hick's Philosophy of Religious Pluralism

The most well known advocate of religious pluralism in the contemporary west is the British philosopher John Hick. Starting with the basic premise of the pervasive religious diversity in the world, he explains this diversity as different ways of conceiving and experiencing the one ultimate divine Reality. This ultimate divine Reality has been thought and expressed by different human mentalities forming and formed by different intellectual frameworks and devotional techniques.<sup>13</sup> Hick explains that religion has been a virtually universal dimension of human life; that God historically revealed himself through various individuals in various situations where

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<sup>8</sup>Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, *Philosophy of Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, 494.

<sup>9</sup>Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach, and Basinger, *Philosophy of Religion*.

<sup>10</sup>“Religious Pluralism,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious\\_pluralism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_pluralism).

<sup>11</sup>Pojman ed., *Philosophy of Religion*, 520.

<sup>12</sup>*The Bhagavad Gita*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, 7.

<sup>13</sup>John Hick, “The Philosophy of World Religions,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 37 (1984), 229-231.

geographic isolation prevented a common revelation to all humanity. Seen in historical context, the major religions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism are not essentially rival. They began at different times and in different places, and each expanded outwards into the surrounding world.<sup>14</sup>

All the main religions recognize that the ultimate divine reality is infinite and as such transcends the grasp of the human mind. God cannot be defined or encompassed by human thought. The God whom our mind can penetrate and whom our thought can circumnavigate is merely a finite and partial image of God.

Just like the six blind men could not completely perceive the elephant, so we cannot have a full grasp of the ultimate and divine reality. As our intellect processes everything we perceive, our partial perceptions of God are further coloured by our intellectual limitations. Hick writes: “The human mind is not a passive screen on which the world imprints itself. On the contrary, it is continuously involved in interpreting the data of perception in terms of the conceptual systems within which we live.”<sup>15</sup> There is an objective reality, but the form in which we are conscious of it is constructed by our perception and thinking. There is an objective divine ultimate Reality, but there is a human factor in the forms in which we are aware of it. We must distinguish between the Ultimate Divine Reality in itself and that Reality as perceived or experienced by human cognition. Hick’s distinction follows Kant’s distinction between the noumenon or the thing-in-itself and the phenomenon or the thing-as-it-appears to us.

The various prayers and hymns from different religions express diverse encounters with the same divine reality. These encounters have taken place within different human cultures by people of different experiences and thinking. Behind these encounters is the same infinite divine reality; the divisions that go with them represent secondary human historical developments. According to Hick, “the different encounters with the transcendent within the different religious traditions may all be encounters with the one infinite reality; though with partially different and

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<sup>14</sup>John Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Ultimate Reality” in Louis P. Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1994, 523.

<sup>15</sup>Dennis Okholm and Timothy Philips eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996, 46.

overlapping aspects of that reality.”<sup>16</sup> Hence, “although the language, concepts, liturgical actions and cultural ethos differ widely from one another, yet from a religious point of view basically the same thing is going on in all of them, namely, human beings coming together within the framework of an ancient and highly developed tradition to open their hearts and minds to God, whom they believe makes a total claim on their lives.”<sup>17</sup>

Hick stresses that the different truth-claims of the world’s major religions are best understood and appreciated as expressions of their differing perceptions, through different religio-cultural “lenses,” of the one ultimate divine Reality, as expressions of their different answers to the boundary questions of origin and destiny, and their different historical memories.<sup>18</sup>

## 5. Religious Freedom

Religious freedom is manifested in freedom of conscience and freedom of worship. This is further extended to freedom of religious association and freedom of religious expression. It is “freedom, on the one hand, for individuals to profess a personal religious faith in conformity with their conviction of conscience, and freedom, on the other hand, for their religious communities to put this conviction into practice and make use of the means which are indispensable for that purpose.”<sup>19</sup>

The recognition of religious freedom came as an offshoot of the recognition of personal freedom of the human individual. During the medieval times, when ordinary individuals did not enjoy personal freedom, there was no clamour for religious freedom. Although different thinkers conceived of the notion of the free will, there was not much discussion of personal freedom, which is the freedom of the person to determine his own course of action and his own beliefs and thoughts. Religious freedom, then, was never an issue. People were baptized according to the religion of the king or the leader and professed the same faith as the king. The religion of the king is the true religion. For much of the medieval period,

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<sup>16</sup>John Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Ultimate Reality,” 524.

<sup>17</sup>Okholm and Philips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 36.

<sup>18</sup>John Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” in Philip Quinn and Kevin Meeker eds., *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 54.

<sup>19</sup>Louis Janssens, *Freedom of Conscience and Religious Freedom*, New York: Alba House, 1966, 119.



Christianity enjoyed this privileged position. Christianity insisted that it was the fullest and most complete revelation of God to Man. If Christianity is true, then other religions cannot be equally true – although they may contain lesser revelations of God that are true. When Christianity was divided by schism and the growth of Protestantism, the Catholic Church assumed an exclusivist position, expressed in the teaching that, outside the Church, there is no salvation.

In modern times, particularly during the height of Marxist and Communist movements, freedom of religion was curtailed in a number of countries. The practice of any form of religion was prohibited and since communism prospered in predominantly Christian countries, Christianity suffered a severe blow to its mission to spread its faith.

Perhaps brought about by the recognition of the disregard for the value of the human person, some thinkers focused on the human person. Gradually, the value and dignity of the human person became an issue in philosophical, social, moral, and political discussions, and many writers and thinkers advocated the recognition of his religious freedom and the freedom of different religions.

One of those first to come out with a clear, authoritative statement on religious liberty was the World Council of Churches (WCC) which was formally established in Amsterdam in 1948. In its first general assembly meeting entitled “Man’s Disorder and God’s Design,” it acknowledged the significance of religious freedom and made official statements concerning it.<sup>20</sup> Its Declaration of Religious Liberty states:

An essential element in a good international order is freedom of religion. This is an implication of the Christian faith and the worldwide nature of Christianity. Christianity, therefore, views the question of religious freedom as an international problem...While the liberty with which Christ has set men free can never be given nor destroyed by any government, Christians, because of that inner freedom, are both jealous of its outward expression and solicitous that all men should have freedom in religious life.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Ho Jin Jun, *Religious Pluralism and Fundamentalism in Asia*, Colorado Springs, CO: International Academic Publishers 2002, 213.

<sup>21</sup>WCC, *Man’s Disorder and God’s Design*, New York: Harper & Brother, 1948, 1: 186, cited in Jun, *Religious Pluralism and Fundamentalism in Asia*, 213.

The Declaration further holds that religious freedom is the fundamental right of all individuals. It states:

The rights of religious freedom herein declared shall be recognized and observed for all persons without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion, and without imposition of disabilities by virtue of legal provisions or administrative acts.<sup>22</sup>

Consequently, the Declaration established four main guidelines:

1. Every person has the right to determine his own faith and creed.
2. Every person has the right to express his religious beliefs in worship, teachings and practice, and proclaim the implications of his beliefs for relationships in a social or political community.
3. Every person has the right to associate with others and to organize with them for religious purposes.
4. Every religious organization, formed and maintained by actions in accordance with the rights of individual person, has the right to determine its policies and practices for the accomplishment of its chosen purposes.<sup>23</sup>

Prior to the WCC Declaration, the Catholic Church had maintained as exclusivist position, based on its dogma and belief that outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation. It assumed that it was the only true religion entitled to propagate the gospel.<sup>24</sup> However, there were those in the Catholic Church who contended that religious freedom is fully compatible with the principles of the Church. This thinking culminated with the Vatican Council II, with its Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*). The Council declared:

The human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>WCC, *Man's Disorder and God's Design*.

<sup>23</sup>WCC, *Man's Disorder and God's Design*, 213-214.

<sup>24</sup>WCC, *Man's Disorder and God's Design*, 216.

<sup>25</sup>Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom [Dignitatis Humanae]*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI, December 7, 1965. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651207\\_dignitatis-humanae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html) (29 March 2006).

This right to religious freedom, the Council stressed, is grounded on “the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed Word of God and by reason itself.”<sup>26</sup> This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and, thus, it is to become a civil right.<sup>27</sup> The Council also stressed that “in accordance with their dignity as persons – that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and, therefore, privileged to bear personal responsibility – that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth.”<sup>28</sup> The free exercise of religion is grounded on both the personal (or internal) and the social aspect of the human person. The exercise of religion emanates from the “internal, voluntary and free acts whereby man sets the course of his life directly toward God.”<sup>29</sup> Since no human power can either command or prohibit man’s personal acts, no human power can curtail the exercise of religion. But since man is a social being, the exercise of his religious convictions requires that “he should give external expression to his internal acts of religion: that he should share with others in matters religious; that he should profess his religion in community.”<sup>30</sup> Any action or policy or law that prohibits the free exercise of religion causes injury or harm to the human person and to the very order established by God for human life.

However, the Council acknowledged the fact that just like any freedom, religious freedom could be abused and, therefore, it asserted that “society has the right to defend itself against possible abuses committed on the pretext of freedom of religion.”<sup>31</sup> In this sense, religious freedom or freedom of religion is not an absolute. There are certain limits to the exercise of such freedom.

## **6. Religious Pluralism and Freedom of Religion**

Religious pluralism, then, is a viable option or position to take, given the diversity of religious beliefs or faiths and the right to freedom of religion. Religious pluralism does not grant a privileged position to any religion.

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<sup>26</sup>Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*.

<sup>27</sup>Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*.

<sup>28</sup>Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*.

<sup>29</sup>Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*.

<sup>30</sup>Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*.

<sup>31</sup>Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*.

Although there are certain irreconcilable doctrines, these are viewed from the perspective that they all pertain to the same ultimate divine Reality. “Central to pluralism is the view of religious traditions as connected, overlapping attempts on the part of human beings to understand and orient themselves towards the sacred.”<sup>32</sup>

Pluralism does not believe that all religions are equally and unequivocally true, for it recognizes the unique identities of different faiths with their own doctrines.<sup>33</sup> But it presupposes that all major religious traditions are equal with respect to a common reference to a single transcendent, divine reality, and that they are also equal with respect to offering a means to human salvation.

Pluralism, or more accurately normative religious pluralism, maintains that the major world religions provide independent salvific access to divine Reality. The contemporary case for pluralism is argued on several grounds: (1) ethically, as the only way to promote justice in our intolerant and oppressive world, (2) in terms of the ineffability of religious experience, so that no religion can claim an absolute stance, and (3) through the historicist thesis that varying cultural and historical contexts preclude absolutist religious claims.<sup>34</sup>

Pluralism is not reducible to unity, and does not advance the idea that there will be a universal religion common to all. “Pluralism is a realistic attitude which having realized the irreducibility of the many to unity, tries to embrace the whole without reducing it to the quantifiable sum total of its parts or to a formal unity of whatever type.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion*, London: Macmillan, 1995, 13.

<sup>33</sup>For example, most Christians believe that Jesus was God incarnate and part of the Holy Trinity, while both Muslims and Jews hold that it is impossible for any human to be God incarnate, and that no Trinity exists. Christians believe that Jesus was crucified and died on the cross, while Muslims believe that Jesus was not crucified and did not die on the cross. Therefore, claiming that both Christianity and Islam are both simply ‘true’ gives rise to a logical contradiction.

<sup>34</sup>Okholm and Philips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 17, cited in John Hick and Paul Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, vii-xii.

<sup>35</sup>Arvind Sharma and Kathleen Dugan eds., *A Dome of Many Colours: Studies in Religious Pluralism, Identity and Unity*, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999, 31-32.

Nor is it irrational, leaving reason behind and simply clinging to one's faith. "Pluralism is a rational effort which leads us to discover intellectually the very limit of reason, because of the factual impossibility of reducing everything to unity."<sup>36</sup> Hence, while it rejects 'rationalism', it does not abandon rationality.

Pluralism is not relativism. All it avoids is the absolutist stand which is tantamount to exclusivity. Pluralism recognizes the mutually incompatible lifestyles and contradictory doctrines. It recognizes each person's conviction of the goodness of one's lifestyle and the truth of one's doctrines. However, it takes away the sting of absolutism, precisely because of the experience that everyone is limited and not absolute.<sup>37</sup> The pluralist, therefore, does not give up his personal convictions, but he does not absolutize them.

Pluralism acknowledges that there are belief systems, worldviews, philosophies, or religions that are mutually incommensurable and, thus, encourages the dialogue between such systems or religions. It promotes the need for inter-religious dialogue to discover common bonds and realize that all religious people participate in Ultimate Reality. Religious pluralism entails not competition but cooperation, and shows that societal and theological changes are necessary to overcome differences among religions. The focus is not on the differences but on the beliefs that are common to all.

The human person has the basic right to the free exercise and expression of his religious beliefs. Consequently, a community of persons expressing a common set of religious beliefs must be accorded the freedom to exercise its religion. The basis for this, as mentioned in the Vatican Council Declaration on Religious Freedom, is the dignity of the human being, a dignity based on the fact that man was created in the image and likeness of God, an "*imago Dei*." Further, "religious freedom is concerned with man in the social and juridical order. It is concerned with him in his relation to other men as he exists in a society, structured, organized and regulated as it is by laws, institutions and practices."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Sharma and Dugan eds., *A Dome of Many Colours*, 32.

<sup>37</sup>Sharma and Dugan eds., *A Dome of Many Colours*, 31-33.

<sup>38</sup>Vincent Grogan and Laurence Ryan, *Religious Freedom in the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council and in Certain Civil Declarations*, Dublin: Scepter Books, 1967, 8.

Since man's right to religious freedom is based on his dignity as a human being, and not on the content or nature of his religious beliefs and practices, he still retains his dignity whether his religious beliefs are true. Consequently, all men have the right to religious freedom regardless of whether their religious convictions are true or erroneous.<sup>39</sup> On this ground, no limit may be set to the right to religious freedom on the grounds that a particular religious conviction, belief or practice is false. Moreover, the question whether a particular religious belief or conviction is true is outside the competence of civil authority.<sup>40</sup> In short, no organization or institution, whether civil or religious, should pass judgment on the truth and validity of religious beliefs or convictions.

The exercise of religious freedom, however, must be done responsibly. Every freedom has its corresponding duties. In exercising this freedom, men must respect the rights of others. Religion cannot be used as a reason to cause harm or injury to other individuals or groups of individuals.

## **7. Conclusion**

Religious pluralism is the proper attitude that promotes religious freedom and freedom of religions. It encourages respect for the free expression of one's religious beliefs and respect for the right of each person to associate with others and to organize with them for religious purposes. Religious pluralism is the proper attitude that recognizes the right of religions to determine their policies and practices for the accomplishment of their chosen purposes.

Respect for religious freedom and freedom of religion can, however, be attained only if there are mutual respect and understanding for the truth-claims and validity-claims of various religions. This respect and understanding cannot be only on the cognitive or epistemic level. They must be attitudinal and experiential. Religious pluralism cannot just be at the doctrinal, epistemological, and cognitive levels. It must be practised and be felt in concrete human experience.

A pluralism that acknowledges and respects the diverse religious systems, doctrines, and beliefs alone can guarantee religious freedom and freedom of religions. Such pluralism is, therefore, a fertile ground for dialogue and harmony among religions.

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<sup>39</sup>Vincent and Ryan, *Religious Freedom*, 9.

<sup>40</sup>Vincent and Ryan, *Religious Freedom*, 11-12.