Without Boundaries?
Deriving Pluralist Theologies for Projects Using a Theology Without Walls

Abstract: This article systematically derives a common pluralist theology from the works of theologians Roger Haight and Amir Hussain. It then discusses this emergent definition of pluralism through the perspective of intent, an examination of exclusive claims and the historicity of formative context. Finally, potential approaches and areas are outlined, such as revelation, salvation, and historicity, in which a pluralist theology can advance a Theology “Without Walls.”

Keywords: Roger Haight, Amir Hussain, Pluralism, Islam, Christianity

Introduction

In postmodern theological discourse concerning multi-religious societies, conceptions of interfaith relations and pluralism are inevitably discussed. However, despite the apparent salutary role that pluralism holds in present-day society, a conceptual definition of what pluralism is can be difficult to pin down. Views on pluralism can range from positive to negative depending on any range of assumptions as to its nature, or the spiritual inclinations of the beholder. In this article, I explore definitions for pluralism through the comparative analysis of the works of two noted pluralist theologians, one Muslim, the other Catholic. In the spirit of attempting to advance a theology without walls, I will seek to derive a common set of attributes for a definition of pluralism that can be employed in a theology without walls. Finally, I will briefly discuss this emergent definition of pluralism through the perspective of anti-pluralist theology and outline approaches—such as a salvation “Without Walls”—in which a pluralist theology can advance the Theology Without Walls project.

In Their Own Words: A definition of Pluralism by Pluralists

In this analysis of pluralist thinking, I have selected the writings of two noted pluralist theologians. Roger Haight is a Jesuit Catholic theologian whose work in the past decade was condemned by the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for holding what then-Cardinal Ratzinger described as “grave doctrinal errors”\(^1\). Amir Hussain is Professor of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount, who is highly involved in interfaith dialogue, including work with the World Conference on Religion and Peace and the Fellowship for Reconciliation.

In his article “Muslims, Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue,” Hussain begins by defining his view of pluralism. He is quick to point out that pluralism is not to be equated with relativism, stating, “When some

\(^{1}\) Ratzinger, “Notification”, 1.

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people hear the term “pluralism,” they think of an “anything goes” moral relativism.” To the contrary, Hussain argues, his definition of pluralism leans heavily on the work of Diana Eck in its approach:

Pluralism is not the same thing as diversity...unless [different people] are involved in active engagement...there can be no pluralism...pluralism is not simply “tolerance” of one another, but rather an active attempt to arrive at an understanding...pluralism is not the same thing as relativism...a genuine pluralistic perspective would be committed to engaging the very differences that we have to gain a deeper sense of each other’s commitments.3

Hussain therefore outlines a set of potential definitions for pluralism, namely, that pluralism involves:
1. Active engagement within a diverse context
2. Moving beyond tolerance to understanding
3. Engaging differences for the sake of understanding own and other’s commitments
4. Not engaging in relativism as it does not ignore differences between religions

Thus, pluralism under Hussain’s model could be described as the active engagement of religious differences between participants of different religions in a diverse context with the explicit aim of gaining better knowledge of both one’s own and the other’s faith commitments.

Haight, while taking a different approach, nonetheless echoes and amplifies much of what Hussain says in arriving at a definition for pluralism. In the chapter “Jesus and the World Religions” in his book Jesus Symbol of God, Haight adds that pluralism takes place not only in the midst of religious diversity, but also requires a sense of historical context, stating:

Religious pluralism is a characteristic of the situation of Christian life...[and the problem becomes] an estimation of the place of Jesus Christ among other religions...religious pluralism is itself a consequence of historicity. Cosmic consciousness...compounds this sense of relativity...theologians and others who allow religious pluralism to germinate in their thinking have passed beyond tolerance of other religions to a positive appreciation of the religious treasures they contain.4

While his theology may seem as if it is willing to engage in relativism, Haight is clear that while pluralists may look for “religious treasures”, they do not seek to reduce the unique orthodoxy and praxis of different religions into a watered down form of universalism, stating that, “pluralist theologians...do not advocate the reduction of all religions to one, but they look for commonalities among them in either a general anthropology, or a formal structure of religion, or common ethical responsibilities.”5

In describing the need for this impulse towards finding commonality, Haight also outlines an explicit reason for pluralist theology: “Behind this impulse lies the...planetary development toward unification of people in terms of travel, communication and general interaction.”6 Interestingly, this apparently pluralist desire for movement towards unifying diverse peoples is also echoed by Hussain in his article:

It is important for progressive Muslims and Muslim communities in general to return to the pluralistic vision of the Qur’an, and establish cooperative relations with other religious communities, particularly at this time...the Qur’an is clear that God could have created people with no differences among them, but that God chose not to do so: ‘If your Lord had so willed it, your Lord would have made humanity one people, but they will not cease to dispute.’ (11:118)7

Thus, Hussain recovers within Islam an impetus for humanity to find a way to reconcile God-ordained differences. In this view, Haight’s view of pluralism having an earthly goal of the unification of people takes on an almost God-sanctioned impetus: to be truly Muslim, one should be pluralist. As Hussain states, “Muslims need to commit ourselves to pluralism, not because we have to but because we should. It is part

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3 Ibid., 252.
4 Haight, Jesus, 395-396.
5 Ibid., 397.
6 Ibid.
of the vision imparted to us by the Qur’an and the example of the Prophet.” Muslims thus share a historical context for accepting pluralism. These implications bear exploring.

An integrated view provided by Hussain and Haight of pluralism is that it involves:
1. Active engagement within a diverse and historic context
2. Moving beyond tolerance to understanding and appreciation
3. Engaging differences for the sake of understanding own and other’s commitments, while simultaneously seeking commonalities in praxis, organization, or ethics.
4. Is not relativism as it does not ignore differences between religions, yet remains focused on the unification rather than division of practitioners of other faiths as its guiding principle.

This definition is good general one, but this definition can be further developed by examining the historical perspective of other religions and revelation, as well as perspectives on salvation.

**Historical Views of Other Religions and Revelation from a Pluralist Perspective**

Pluralists also appear to seek to place both the practice of pluralism and revelation within a historical context. Hussain is clear that Islam has historically developed within a pluralistic context amidst other religions. In referring to the vision imparted by the Qur’an to Muslims, Hussain notes that,

The Qur’an...assumed that the first hearers of the revelation were familiar with the stories of Judaism and Christianity... besides the Qur’anic presentation of Jesus, there was a range of interpretations in previous Christian communities about the life and nature of Christ. The Qur’an was revealed in a world that knew about various other religions.9

He further explains, “Throughout history, Muslims have existed in dialogue with others. Whether... productive or disastrous, Muslims have defined themselves in dialogue. They have always understood—and constructed—their “Islams” in the context of pluralism.”10 In describing the nature of this early pluralist environment, Hussain also points out that the early relationship between Muslims and Christians was far from antagonistic, noting that the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia offered protection to members of the fledgling Muslim community when they were being persecuted in Mecca: “this is a very early example in Islam of the importance of pluralism and interreligious dialogue, and the debt that we Muslims owe to Christians.”11

Nonetheless, Hussain goes on to note that in the historical context of the Qur’an there are passages that can lead those interpreting it towards an antagonistic view of other religions. He historicizes these passages in noting that the Qur’an reflects the experiences of the Muslim community—often at odds with Meccan adherents of polytheism and Jewish Arab tribes—throughout the twenty-three-year period during which revelation to Muhammad occurred:

Given that the Qur’an was revealed over a period of twenty three years under a number of different historical settings, it is not surprising that there are different sets of guidance given to the young Muslim community...there is also 5:82, which reads, ‘You will find among the people the Jews and the Polytheists to be the strongest in enmity to the believers...nearest among them in love to the Believers will you find those who say, ‘We are Christians’.‘12

For Hussain, it is therefore crucial for Muslims to mindful of the historical context of the revelation given to Muhammad, lest it be misinterpreted. It is important, Hussain warns, “for Muslims to be aware of how the... Qur’an can be used both as a bridge building tool and to justify mutual exclusivism.”13

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8 Ibid., 266.
9 Ibid., 253.
10 Ibid., 258.
11 Ibid., 254.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
Haight, also, asserts the need for Christians to be mindful of the historical context of the relationship early Christianity had with religions in the Roman Empire, and to take care using that context as a guide for determining an attitude toward other religions today:

Early Christianity too made its way in a religious situation that was pluralistic, and defined itself over and against other religious traditions. But early Christians were not shaped by a postmodern culture. As in early Christianity, Christians today must make judgments of truth...in a critical, historically conscious way, and in dialogue with other vital religious traditions... [rather than lapsing] into a propositional view of revelation and fundamentalism.  

Thus Haight, too, seeks to warn against the impetus to let past historical events guide contemporary interreligious relations and inform modern theological issues. Like Hussain’s view of the revelation to Muhammad, Haight similarly places the Christian understanding of revelation—the Jesus event—within a historical context, although he addresses it more fully from the perspective of salvific inclusivism.

The Jesus Problem: A Christian Pluralist’s View of Salvation

Coming from a pluralist standpoint, Haight admits from the outset that the Jesus event and its implications for the Christian view of salvation pose a problem with regard to inclusivism, and that this “narrow christological problem must be addressed.” Specifically, over time the Christian doctrine of a salvation exclusively mediated and made complete through Jesus has been largely built around the interpretation of biblical scripture such as John 3:16-17: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (NRSV, emphasis mine) Interpretation of this statement has generally been exclusive; as such interpretation has viewed Jesus as an “only,” and thus a unique salvific vehicle available to Christians alone. This view, not surprisingly, does not easily lend itself well to a pluralistically-oriented viewpoint of salvation.

Haight seeks to negotiate this theological problem primarily through an interpretation of scripture which historicizes salvific language, regulating the salvific power of Jesus to those who had direct contact with him at the time of the Jesus event:

historically these texts of the past, which in some way suggest “only through Jesus,”... [have their] foundation in the actual encounter of God’s salvation in Jesus. Their meaning in their historical context is derived from and contained in the actual religious encounter with Jesus.  

With the Jesus event and its salvific power thus temporalized, Haight is then able to consider Jesus as meta-narrative for a personal God;

When one recognizes that God’s creative action is always actuality, and that God’s personal loving presence cannot be separated from God’s creative presence, no reason remains to design a meta-narrative that makes Jesus’ historical life a cause for God’s constant and ever present salvific love.

Having thus disassociated the specificity of Jesus from God’s “ever present salvific love,” Haight is then able to take the logical next step that God’s desire to save all of humanity—and not merely followers of Christ—stems from God’s ever present and constant love for humanity. As such, “the multiplicity of religions and the “salvation” mediated through them...are or can be “on a par” with Jesus Christ.” Thus, other religions are also true, for as Haight puts it explicitly,

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14 Haight, Jesus, 404.
15 Ibid., 395.
16 Ibid., 404.
17 Ibid., 422.
18 Ibid., 399.
if other religions are not true, then one is thrown back into an unacceptable alternative: either there is no explicit social-historical mediation of God’s grace for the vast majority of humankind, so that each person must encounter God’s grace in his or her individual existence and history, or one is left with the dilemma of the exclusivists, of a God who withholds salvation from the vast majority of people during their lifetime.19

Perhaps not surprisingly, Haight’s Theocentric—rather than Christocentric—view of salvation is one of the aspects of his work that has brought him into conflict with the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which claims that “this theological position denies fundamentally the universal salvific mission of Jesus Christ (see Acts 4:12; I Timothy 2:4-6; John 14:6), and, as a consequence, the mission of the Church to announce and communicate the gift of Christ the Savior to all human beings (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15; Ephesians 3:8-11).”20 This conflict over doctrine is serious enough that Haight has been “prohibited from teaching Catholic theology.”21

### A Muslim Pluralist’s View of Salvation

As discussed above, Hussain locates the revelation of the Qur’an in a historical context, and his views on salvation can be inferred from a few key statements he makes. In his view, submission to God is the highest order for Muslims; he therefore views all forms of practice as fit praise: “I have said Friday prayers in the Al-Aqsa mosque...and I have prayed in the sweat lodge in Manitoba with my Cree elders, and I do not think Allah distinguishes between these prayers.”22 He is candid that, like Haight’s, this view of salvation is contrary to traditional views held by many Muslims. As way of illustration, he goes on to describe the varied reactions of his students, “some are genuinely interested in connections between Islam and the religious traditions of the First Nations. Others are horrified that I have prayed with non-Muslims or that I have linked the lodge with the mosque.”23

He further goes on to note that his inclusivist view of universal salvation as being antithetical to “Muslims in North America and around the world who...see Islam as the only true religion, and often their particular way of being Muslim as the only way to be Muslim.”24 Of these views, he states,

> It is easy to be taught to hate Christians and Jews...if there are few actual Christians or Jews in one’s country. [North America] is a very different matter. The stereotypes...that Christians worship three gods and are therefore polytheistic fall away when one is invited to a Christian worship service and realizes that it is the same God [being worshipped].25

In response to Muslims who see Islam as the “only true religion,” Hussain quotes his mentor, noted Islamicist Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who wrote “the essential tragedy of the modern Islamic world is...instead of giving their allegiance to God, [they] have been giving it to something called Islam.”26 Again echoing his view that a true Muslim perspective of the Qur’anic message embraces pluralism and dialogue, he states, “It is through dialogue that we learn about ourselves, about others, and, in so doing, perhaps about God.”27

To summarize the above analysis of Haight and Hussain’s view of the historical nature of pluralistic relations within their faith traditions, their temporalizing of revelation, and their unique approach to salvific claims within their traditions, it is clear that in addition to the initial definition of pluralism their work lends two additional criteria for an emerging definition of pluralism, which includes:

5. The placement of revelation within a historical, temporal context.
6. Having a generally inclusivist view of salvation, one that is often at odds with orthodox doctrine.

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19 Ibid., 415.
21 Ibid., 5.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 267.
26 Ibid., 260-261.
27 Ibid., 267.
An Integrated Definition of Pluralism from Catholic and Muslim Viewpoints

In this article I have examined the work of Hussain and Haight in an effort to arrive at an integrated definition of pluralism informed by their historicist views of other religions and revelation, their rationale for an economy of salvation, and combined it with earlier definitions of pluralism implied by their work. Using the format proposed at the outset, and mindful of the above, an integrated definition of pluralism from these unique Muslim and Catholic viewpoints is that its practice involves the following attributes:

1. Seeking active engagement within a diverse and historic context.
2. Moving beyond tolerance to understanding and appreciation.
3. Engaging differences for the sake of understanding one’s own and the other’s commitments, while simultaneously seeking commonalities in praxis, organization, or ethics.
4. Is not relativism as it does not ignore differences between religions, yet remains focused on the unification rather than division of practitioners of other faiths as its guiding principle.
5. The placement of revelation within a historical, temporal context.
6. Having a generally inclusivist view of salvation, one that is often at odds with orthodox doctrine.

Final Thoughts: Pluralist Theology and a Theology Without Walls

In this paper I have attempted to arrive at a common definition of pluralism comparing the work of two pluralist theologians: one Muslim, one Catholic. While further work remains to be done, one common definition of pluralism can be developed through careful reading of these two perspectives. It is my hope that this exercise proves helpful in further framing work on Theology Without Walls, and is useful for future projects which delve into comparative Christian-Islamic theology, and pluralist theology in more detail.

While I have made short reference in this article to other theological positions that are in opposition to the pluralist views of Hussain and Haight, these points of view have not been explored here in great detail. Nonetheless, there is a substantial body of theological work in both Islam and Catholicism that counters many of the attributes of the definition for pluralism arrived at above. Indeed, postmodern approaches to civil and religious society almost precipitate a reactionary response by modern orthodox and nationalistic groups.28 Shades of such responses can be seen in contemporary events where extreme orthodox groups persecute minorities in their midst, and multicultural approaches to society are under siege by varying degrees of populist jingoism. More sedate examples can be found in the works of the Vatican as outlined in Dominus Iesus and the works of noted fundamentalist theologian Sayyid Qutb in Islam: Religion of the Future. Both take extreme exception with aspects of the above derived definition of pluralism, namely, that salvation should be viewed inclusively. In response, for example, Dominus Iesus states “No one, therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ,”29 while Qutb states clearly that, “Islam is a system for practical human life in all its aspects...the Islamic way of life [is] the basic system ordained by God...salvation necessarily requires...[this] Divine system.”30 Clearly the salvific positions of both Qutb and the Vatican are at odds with those of Haight and Hussain; interestingly, they are also at odds with each other.

Taking this unsurprising exclusivist opposition into account, it is in the mutual exploration of areas such as this—such as the implications of a salvation “without walls”—that I think the approach I am outlining here offers promising contributions to the Theology Without Walls project. Using the above definition, to “engage differences...while simultaneously seeking commonalities in praxis, organization, or ethics...” and the “placement of revelation within a historical, temporal context...” while “having a generally inclusivist view of salvation” strikes me as an inherent approach Theology Without Walls might take.

I have written elsewhere that the revelatory power of God transcends faith, space and time, and it is possible that Theology Without Walls might offer the best system for exploring this.31 Indeed, Professor

28 Turner, Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism, 77-94.
30 Qutb, Islam, 745.
Martin stated in his opening remarks during the Theology Without Walls session at the 2014 AAR Annual Meeting: “The aim of TWW is explicitly theological, an effort to understand ultimate reality as fully as possible. Participants are inquirers, not representatives of particular traditions.” Unlike comparative theologians, who must as a matter of discipline ultimately return to within the boundaries of their faith of origin, theologians operating within a pluralistically oriented Theology Without Walls may seek out the ongoing revelatory power of the divine as a potentially disruptive exercise.

Finally, I have limited the scope of this essay to the specific works of Haight and Hussain cited. A larger project would adopt a more comprehensive review of their writings and incorporate the writings of other pluralist theologians, and evaluate those positions to further refine the definitions arrived at here. It would, for example, be very useful to include voices from traditions other than Christianity and Islam as the inclusion of non-Abrahamic perspectives may yield particularly interesting views with regard to salvation, revelation and historicity, all “Without Walls”. I am confident, however, that the Theology Without Walls project provides a context for such explorations to occur, and hope this will emerge as an approach.

This exercise has been useful, therefore, as a starting point for further reflections exploring the potential for Theology Without Walls. In reviewing the perspectives of two pluralist theologians of different faiths, we have arrived at a common, if tentative, definition for pluralism. From the perspective of scholars approaching Theology Without Walls, this exercise has demonstrated interesting areas of commonality that go beyond the self-definitions of pluralism held by both theologians and ways in which a pluralist framework might be employed. More broadly, it has demonstrated that common definitions can be developed which may be used by theologians from different faiths and revised as required in seeking out a higher reality. The ultimate test of this approach will be its use. As with pluralist theology, this approach has sought to find commonality and unity, and seeks understanding and acceptance.

References


