COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY AND PLURALIST HYPOTHESIS IN THE POST MODERN PERSPECTIVE

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"As that which manifests is endless, so the places of manifestations must be endless."   Ibn Arabi

The centre-point of this disquisition is to compare and contrast Christianity and Islam as two great competing vehicles of knowledge of God. Since both the traditions belong to the same Abrahamic world-view, they have a common meta-narrative and hence do agree on certain points about the concept of God. However, it is also true that these two traditions express quite divergent views on doctrinal, creedal and epistemological issues. We come across in these traditions very controversial discernment and incompatible doctrinal frameworks about the nature of God and his revelation. Here, it is very reasonable to ask whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Can we treat these traditions as equally valid modes of experience of the religious truth? Could we reasonably say that both are equally true and rightly directed redemptive ways to the Real *an Sich*? John Hick's answer is in the affirmative. He is a staunch supporter of Religious Pluralism. However, the pluralist hypothesis of Professor Hick, though provides us with some illuminating insights into the structural foundations of religion, has its own difficulties which need to be taken into account.

Professor Ninian Smart and Dr. Keith Ward have expressed their serious reservations on Hick's thesis. For example, Ninian

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Smart claims that as far as the concepts and practice go, the two foci of faith are different. The Christians believe in Trinity. The Christian concept of God is organically related to God's Unity in terms of Trinity;[1] hence, Islamic Allah and Christian God are of quite different nature. In the same way, some Muslim hardliners who do not follow the true pluralist spirit of Islam claim that Christians do not worship One true God of the Abrahamic monotheism. Their objection is that since the Christians worship Jesus and believe in Holy Trinity, they are polytheists. It means that differences are of very strong nature, which must not be ignored. Neither Christians nor Muslims can give up their respective positions. Actually this is a matter of *raison d'etre* and must be taken care of properly. It will be a mistaken approach to think that differences, which exist between them, are unimportant or inessential. However, one will have to admit that when they talk of God, they, despite conceptual differences, refer to the same Being and deal with the same kind of religious issues. Both the religions have sprung up from the same history, experience and the greater myth of the Hebrew monotheism. And both seek with the same zeal and passion the experience of the presence of God amidst them. They equally believe that God has made himself known through revelation. He has spelled out the saving truth through the Prophets, who exhort us to understand his glory, obey his commandment, and respond to him in penitence. They agree with each other that nothing else but God is the sole object of worship. All other objects of worship, in their view, are demons. Both of the religions condemn all types of idolatrous practice. They portray God as One Sovereign, Creator, Sustainer, Infinite, Immutable and Self-Existent God. These are the grounds, which show us that there is a sufficient degree of resemblance between Muslim and Christian conceptions of God. This resemblance also extends to the vehicles and sources of the Divine knowledge. There are some other points of agreement such as that universe began through the creative fiat of God and will end in cataclysmic divine judgement. We live only once and on the day of judgement will face an eternal hell or heaven. The human problem is sin and evil. We all need to be saved and salvation is brought about by divine grace and forgiveness.

Here comes in the problem of exclusivism. I think it is reasonable to believe that all serious claims to truth are basically exclusive. It is quite natural for all religious traditions to claim to have the most perfect and adequate approach to the Truth. Each religious tradition is bound to the idea that it has a lock on the truth. It is also natural to hold that except my religious tradition all other traditions are simply mistaken. They must be rejected as containing substantial falsehood. Only my religious tradition gives a finally complete picture of the Divine. Only the personal faith experience I have gone through is valid and efficacious. There is no other name under heaven except the one I believe in, which can save men from fire of the Hell. One can explain this position with the help of an analogy from the domain of art. We all know that the famous painting 'Mona Lisa' is the creative work of Leonardo da Vinci. But suppose for a moment that there are many a fake picture of Mona Lisa in circulation, how can we decide which picture is the original one; especially in the case when every one asserts that the picture in his possession is the original one. Might be the fakes are so perfect that no one is able to differentiate them from the original picture. May be the artist himself has created a great many copies of his own work. Thus perhaps all pictures are true and none is spurious or fake. The other tentative position is that someone might declare that the picture I have given heart to is the real one and all others are fake. By implication it means that choosing of the Divine picture is a matter of giving heart to a particular religious tradition. It also means that perhaps there are many pictures of the Divine equally true and valid.

Then there is another explanation provided by a Buddhist story of three blind men, who were touching an elephant.[2] It is so narrated that the first blind man touched the elephant's leg. He said, "I think an elephant is like the trunk of a great tree. The second blind man while holding the elephant's trunk, said, "I believe an elephant is like a large snake." The third blind man who touched his body said, "I believe an elephant is like a great wall." Each blind man was convinced that he was right and others were mistaken without realizing that they were all touching the same elephant. Some believe the blind men in the parable

represent the major religions of the world. Every religion is in contact with the same Being without perceiving it as a whole. The point of the story is that just as each of the blind men feels only a part of the elephant and claims to know what the elephant is, every religion has only partial access to the Reality, yet it claims to hold a lock on the truth. Before proceeding further, one thing needs to be made clear that the significance of this parable should be seen in the perspective of antagonism between Buddhism and Hinduism. Whoever first narrated this parable, whether Buddha or some one from his followers, the purpose of this parable was to condemn the main tenets of Hindu theology. Buddha was not a theist in any sense of the word. Neither does he believe in gods and the supra-sensible realm. It means that the significance of this parable is partial. Its importance in our case is to make us realize that it is always wrong to claim a lock on the truth. The cognitive activity of our perceiving and intuiting mind is limited in scope. Although, the theist may be well convinced that God is objectively real, he must be conscious of the fact that God is not as objective as the physical things are like an elephant, a table or a tree. It will be a mistake to compare him with the blind men's elephant, which in fact is a physically knowable thing and hence ultimately a matter belonging to the perceptual world. God, contrarily, is a supreme spiritual being surrounded by the clouds of unknowing. In Ghazali's words, he has veiled himself by seventy thousand veils. So it is not that religious believers are blind, it is rather the hiddenness and otherness of God that causes the epistemic blindness. Ambiguity, confusion, objective insufficiency, and hiddenness and doubt are the essential rules of the religious language game. Perhaps the reason behind this ambiguity is that God has deliberately left men free in relation to himself so that they shall not be compelled to be conscious of him. In this way, he who comes to be conscious of God's presence remains a free and responsible agent. God requires that his knowledge must not be forced upon the believer. Rather it should depend on one's own free will. Thus in religion, knowledge of the Truth is not a matter of coercion. Autonomy and free choice are considered as the basic principles of religious epistemology. If some one seeks to have knowledge, he must

apply his heart, re-orientate his attitude, and concentrate his attention on what is being learnt and known. Since the object of our knowledge is essentially hidden, ineffable and the most Holy, one is directed to reactivate one's spirit by raising the level of consciousness, which may break the chains of finitude and establish the contact with the infinite Being. It is because of this requirement, the Sufi master asks the novice first to follow the footsteps of those who know the Truth and then to go through the process of purgation and self-realization by polishing the glass of his heart. The novice is also advised to keep in mind that ultimately knowledge is a divine gift. God, who ultimately himself is the source of knowledge about the essential nature of his Being, unveils the secrets according to the aptitude and ability of the seeker. The Sufi masters say that God shows his face in the mirror of the heart of his servant according to his understanding. So one can reasonably infer that there must be as many pictures of God as many are the mirrors of hearts. Hence, Ibn Arabi claims: "The roads that lead to God are as many as the breaths of the creatures."[3]

Now when the roads to God are many, they can run from different directions to the same goal. Islam upholds this pluralist position. The Qur'ān says that God has sent revelation to every nation for guidance and deliverance from sin and ignorance: "Allah raised prophets bearing good news and warning and he revealed with them the Book with truth" (2:213). The people of the Book can equally share the mercy of God and can participate in the experience of salvation on account of their good deeds. Distortion in salvific messages has occurred due to sinful attitude and parochial understanding of the believers. The conditions for salvation in the Semitic tradition are: (1) the believers should surrender their will to the will of God; (2) they should lead a righteous life and stand on firmest grounds in their faith in One God by shunning all kinds of idolatry and polytheism. According to the Qur'ān, God has raised in every nation an Envoy proclaiming that there is no god save Allah and the people should shun false gods and deities. God has promised grace and mercy to the followers of those religions who follow the doctrine of monotheism and promote good deeds among themselves. When

the Qur'ān says, 'The only true faith in Allah's sight is Islam,' it does not mean that Islamic message should be taken in a narrow and exclusivist perspective. The term 'Islam' does not apply exclusively to the religion of Muhammad, rather it happens to cover all the monotheistic faiths. Verse 77 of the same Sura defines the term "religion of Allah" as being that of every one who submits to him, and the verse that follows makes this point entirely clear. It says: "Say! We believe in Allah, in what has been revealed to us; in that which was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Jacob and the tribes; and in that which Allah gave to Moses, Jesus and the Prophets. We make no distinction between any of them, and we surrender to God (*Lahu Muslimun*)." Verse 59 of Sura 11 says: "Believers (in the Qur'ān), Jews, Christians and Sabaeans and whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does what is right, shall be rewarded by their Lord; they shall have no fear nor shall they grieve." Verse 45 of Sura 29 says to the faithful: "Be courteous when you argue with the people of the Book, except with those among them who do evil, and say: 'We believe in that which has been revealed to us and which was revealed to you; our Lord and yours is one, to Him we surrender ourselves (*Lahu Muslimun*).'" Verse 21 of Sura 31 says: "He that surrenders himself *(yuslim)* to Allah and leads a righteous life, stands on the firmest ground." Verses 3 and 4 of Sura 11 say "Those who trust what has been revealed to you and to others before you and firmly believe in the life to come, these are rightly guided by their Lord; these shall surely triumph." The Qur'ān seems to profess that the divisions among monotheistic faiths are due to the mystery of the Divine will. All we must do is to rival one another in good works, and at the day of resurrection God will declare to us the truth behind our differences. Verse 53 of Sura 5 says: "Had God so willed, he would have made you one community. But he has not done so, in order that he might prove you in regard to what has come to you. So strive to be foremost in good works. You will all return to God and then he will tell you about things in which you have differed." According to Professor Fazlur Rehman, "the positive value of different religions and communities, then, is that they may compete with each other in goodness."[4]

Here the important thing to note is that the Jewish, Christian and Islamic revealed scriptures not only differ on a number of beliefs, but also lead to somewhat contradictory world-views. A Muslim fundamentalist, for instance, would reject some of the most important Christian beliefs as mistaken and wrong. It is commonly argued that the message brought by Jesus has been corrupted. Similarly, a fundamentalist Christian would claim that Islam is one of the greatest false faiths. Mohammedan monotheism is a departure from true monotheism. Islam, in contrast, has very strongly preached that Allah sent the perfect message, but Jews and Christians both distorted what they received, Jews by inventing all sorts of petty legalistic details and Christians by importing false notions from the Greek philosophy. Accordingly, Muslims maintain that Islam is the only pure, well-preserved and perfect religion. Of course these conflicting claims present us with a horrible scenario of quarrelsome disputes. For an atheist like J. L. Mackie this dispute is absolutely meaningless. It has nothing to do with objective reality. For Mackie, all revelations are delusive expression of world consciousness. All religious experiences are purely subjective and thus have no cognitive value. They must be rejected as nonsensical and vacuous. On the opposite side is the theistic outlook, which recognizes that all religious traditions rightly claim to have objective referent. Hick, for example, will claim that all religious experiences are the experiences of something objective. Yet it must be recognized that truth and falsehood have fused together in the doctrines of all world religions. All revelations, according to Hick, lead to the same Reality. It is the human response to them, which has introduced conflicts, deviations, disputes and corruptions.

If one accepts the second position which conforms to the theistic world-view, then one must also acknowledge that each and every theistic tradition is within its epistemic right to uphold truth-claims necessary to safeguard its *raison d'etre*. In the same way, each tradition is also within its epistemic right to claim to have 'the most adequate approach to truth'.[5] It is also reasonable for each tradition to claim to have access to a pure, uncorrupted, primal revelation. Then the question is: is it reasonable to adopt an exclusivist view that only the tradition I hold dear to my heart

is true and the others are not? Do we have some intellectual criteria to decide, which tradition has "the truth"? Hick does not agree with the atheist's proposal that all religions contain truth-claims, which are essentially non-veridical. In Hick's view, since religious beliefs can be verified in principle, they cannot be called meaningless or delusive. First of all, he argues, religious beliefs are based on experiential state of affair to which no rational doubt can be applied. The believer feels fully justified in believing what he has so vividly experienced. Second, religious doctrines are based on the theistic belief that 'there will be a post mortem awareness of the divine Reality.' The possibility of the awareness of God in the afterlife situation is a prediction, which could be proved true or false. This possibility of eschatological verification of theistic belief provides the believer with strong cognitive grounds to believe in the existence of God. Thus, Hick does not find plausible the naturalist's claim that all religious beliefs are delusionary. Then he examines the question of absolutism. This is what Hick calls the exclusivist position. Absolutism, in contrast to naturalism, generally embraces a realist view of religious phenomena. In addition to it, absolutism maintains that only one system of religious belief is literally true and that other religious systems are false. Hick emphatically rejects this position. He claims that absolutism may seem plausible only if it is focused on one's own tradition. If absolutism were true, Hick suggests, one must expect empirical evidence to confirm it. For example, the true religion must be more efficient at producing saints. But evidently this is not the case. We do not have criteria to claim that one religious tradition is more efficient and the other is not. Every religious tradition is fully devoted to the cause of bringing moral transformation in the lives of its followers.[6]

After having rejected naturalism and absolutism, Hick offers his own position saying that "the great post axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it."[7] Hick's pluralist position rests on the view that one divine reality is the ultimate source of all religious experience. Now the question is: how can all religions be experiencing the same reality when their conceptions of the Real are diverse and

contradictory? Hick resolves this problem by drawing upon the thought of Immanuel Kant. Kant, according to Hick, "distinguish[ed] explicitly between an entity as it is in itself and as it appears in perception."[8] He applies this Kantian distinction to religious phenomena, and thereby proposes a distinction between the Real *an sich* (as it actually exists) and the Real as perceived and experienced by individuals in a particular tradition.[9] On the basis of this distinction, Hick claims that individual religious traditions have conflicting conceptions of the Real. Since they have emerged out of various divine phenomena in different times and places, none of them has direct access to the one Ultimate ("the Real"). Different religious traditions are the phenomenal representation of the divine. Our religious perception of the Real is caused by the religious tradition to which we belong. This tradition acts as 'conceptual lens'. This conceptual lens helps shape our perception of the Real.

Putting his hypothesis into a theistic perspective, Hick suggests that "each concrete historical divine personality — Jahweh, the Heavenly Father, the Qur'ānic Allah — is a joint product of the universal divine presence and a particular historically formed mode of constructive religious imagination."[10] In other words, our religious beliefs come partially from experience of the divine reality and partially from one's own imagination based on a particular cultural and historical background. Hick thus comes to the view that no religious tradition has direct perception of the Real. Hick insists that all religious traditions are projections onto something transcendent and real. They are the joint product of two factors: divine reality in itself, on the one hand and human culture and human needs on the other. But what is this Divine Reality that appears in so many different ways? Hick thinks that we cannot say anything about that. The reason is that human concepts fail to apply to the Divine, which in Kantian terminology is called being in-itself. Our concepts apply only to the phenomena of the divine. All we can know about the divine, as a being in itself, is that it infinitely transcends all our concepts, all the myths, metaphors and images we use. The function of these myths, metaphors, and images is to guide us to "a reality about which we cannot speak in non mythological terms."[11]

However, each religious tradition represents an authentic way in which the Real is conceived and experienced in a particular way. All religions aim at transforming human life. They endeavour to move us from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness. To some extent, at least, Hick thinks they all succeed in transforming people. There are real saints in all major traditions, and there is no reason to think that one tradition is better at producing saints than any other. All believe that the possibility of salvation or liberation is grounded somehow in the ultimate nature of reality.

Hick is a very careful scholar who writes with clarity and precision. He is one of the most articulate and persuasive pluralists in the English-speaking world.[12] His position on the Pluralist hypothesis is indeed very sophisticated. But his theory, like any other pluralist theory that claims all religions are manifestation of the same ultimate reality, faces an immediate difficulty, *viz.* the contradictory truth-claims that different religions make. The question one may raise is: how can all religions be experiencing the Real when their conceptions of the Real are diverse and contradictory? In other words, one may ask: Is Hick's pluralist hypothesis plausible in the light of conflicting truth-claims of various religious traditions? For example, one of the basic beliefs of Islam is that there is only one God. Islam rejects all kinds of polytheism. If this Islamic claim is correct, then Hindus who claim that there are many gods cannot be true. Hindus and Buddhists believe that we live many times on this earth on the basis of the karmic system entering again and again into the stream of human life to form new psycho-physical person. Whereas Jews, Christians and Muslims believe that man lives only once and then faces an eternal heaven or hell. Hindus of the school of advaita Vedanta believe that deepest depth of our being is the eternal and immutable atman, whereas Buddhist believe that there is no such eternal atman and that the human 'soul' is a transient stream of psychic events. Jews believe that the children of Israel are God's chosen people, whereas non-Jews either reject the idea of such a status or extend it to all people. Christians believe that Jesus was a God incarnate, whereas non-Christians either deny this or extend the idea of incarnation in

varying degrees to all instances of divine immanence in human life.[13]

According to this scheme of things, since the ultimate Real transcends human beings and this world, his common characteristic is ineffability. Most of the religious traditions believe that ultimate reality is inexpressible by any human concepts. Thus the idea of the unknowability of the Real is the common feature of many a tradition. Because of this necessary condition of ineffability, the great world traditions have perceived and experienced him differently in different cultural backgrounds and consequently have described him with the help of different conceptual webs. Difference of linguistic tools has also played an important role in discerning an adequate expression of God. The authenticity of a religious tradition depends upon its stereological effectiveness. In other words, if a religion is effective in bringing salvation or liberation to its followers, then it is authentic manifestation of the Real. It embodies a valid way for human beings to relate themselves to one Divine Reality. However, there are many question marks. The most important one is: What should we do with the incompatible truth-claims we encounter in different religious traditions? One answer is that this incompatibility in truth-claims of different religions is partly due to the ineffability of the Real and partly due to cultural variations and human needs. But do we have some criteria to differentiate between what belongs to the transcendent reality and what belongs to human culture and social needs in a particular religious tradition. The idea of a wholly other and unknowable God does not allow us to have some neutral criteria of describing what really God is. We can only understand the nature and reality of God by following a particular set of rules prescribed by a religious form of life. It is impossible to attain salvation without committing oneself to and participating in a tradition of worship and prayer. The simple reason is that salvation cannot be attained without following a particular salvific path strictly in accordance with the guidelines stipulated by the spiritual master. Therefore, it is wrong to presume that the religious path prescribed by one spiritual guide can be rejected in view of the reason that it seems to go in the opposite direction of the teachings of the other

spiritual master one prefers to follow. What I seek to emphasize is that religious experience does not happen in a void. It is not blind man's response to the reality (elephant). It is rather a matter of enriching one's intellectual faculties and polishing the glass of one's heart. It is also important to recognize that a religious experience occurs within the conceptual framework of a particular tradition of prayer and worship. Hence, one must not ignore the role of the epistemic context regarding religious faith and experience. Further, one should not allow the corollaries of religious pluralism to cast their negative effect on the redemptive role of a religious tradition. Otherwise, we may submit to the generalized form of truth and falsehood, which as a result can destroy the religious faith game. We cannot underrate the importance of different truth-claims on the basis of which each tradition maintains its distinction and seems to work effectively for the salvation of its believers. Any attempt to reconcile the opposing claims of different traditions or to bring about some sort of synthesis among the conflicting theologies may result in distorting the face of one or the other tradition. For example, here one may pinpoint the incompatibility of views, which exists between Muslim and Christian believers on such question as the divinity of Jesus Christ. For a Christian believer the whole argument depends on the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. In contrast, for a Muslim believer this belief is untenable and mistaken. The Islamic argument depends on saving activity of the belief in 'Tauhid', that is, the unique oneness of God. One may reasonably infer from these claims that conflicting truth-claims not only mark the boundary line between Christianity and Islam but are also required to safeguard the raison d'etre of each of these traditions.

To restate this argument briefly, one may say that if the conceptual distinctiveness of a religious tradition were brushed aside, then there would be left no good reason for giving the heart to one denomination of faith, rather than the other. Each and every religious tradition, whether Christian or Muslim, is deeply rooted in its spiritual web and conceptual framework based on a particular method of interpreting events in phenomenal world. Each tradition has its own ethnic rationale and cultural

background. When a religious experience occurs, it occurs within the well-defined and well-articulated epistemic conditions and on the situational level of significance with which a tradition is particularly concerned. Thereby, it is quite natural that the personal religious experience demands from the believer a proper type of disposition, a sophisticated level of consciousness, loyal participation and joyful commitment to the specific form of his religious tradition. However, it must be remembered that if some one fulfils all these requirements, he will not necessarily go through the religious experience. An ordinary man of faith may undergo faith experience, but it is always occasional and short lived. But in the case of persons like prophets and saints, "the consciousness of God's presence has been relatively continuous and pervasive."[14] It should also be taken into notice that every religious experience occurs within a community of believers. It is bound to a particular conceptual framework. It generally agrees with the orthodox talk. And it must follow the instructions of the spiritual director. Consequently, if someone assumes that religious experience can take place without having the stamp of a particular conceptual system, he is absolutely mistaken as he means to imply that God-experience can occur in a lingua-cultural void. This position is not only logically unsustainable but is also absurd. In this regard, one may point out that even the experience of 'sunyata', which happens to exclude any reference to God, cannot occur without fulfilling conditions prescribed by the Buddhist masters. The other example is that of mystic experience of union. Such an experience, in which the individual self of the mystic is dissolved in the infinite Self, is also context dependent. In this state a mystic would certainly lose contact with the individual order of consciousness, but he does not suffer the absolute loss of his consciousness. His coming back from the labyrinth of mystic state to the normal world proves that the mystic continues to retain some sort of personal identity. This is why when the mystics emerge from his experience, he plays a spiritually fruitful role in his community; he leads a life of rather extraordinary goodness. The other examples, which show that religious experiences have community dependent character, are that when a Christian mystic like mother Julian of Norwich would

come to the door of experience, she would find out that the way to God is only possible through Jesus Christ. Similarly when a Muslim like Rabia of Basra would enter the mystic state, she would discover that one couldn't have access to the Real One without mediation of the Prophet Muhammad.

What I wish to underscore is that knowledge of God can be justified on the basis of revelatory matrixes, religious experiences, distinctive form of spiritual feelings, rational and moral schemes with prayer and worship in accordance with the authoritative teaching of the community. But one should not ignore the fact that faith experiences and saving events only occur within the premises of one or the other religious form of life. Without participating in a particular tradition of prayer, neither can we understand the theoretical vision of the ultimate Real nor can we attain the goal of liberation in this world or hereafter. It means the saving contact with God cannot be achieved both theoretically and practically without giving heart to a particular religious form of life. If this position is not accepted, then we might have an important question to deal with. The question is: If there were a dispute between a Christian believer and his detractor, *e.g.* a Muslim, on such crucial matters as Trinity, Crucifixion, Atonement, etc. how could we decide the dispute as an arbiter? As a matter of fact, the idea of an arbiter is irrelevant in religious conflicts. We cannot produce some general procedure of test and check for conflict resolution in religious matters. Religious believers always justify their faith-claims on the basis of their veridical experiences, revelatory matrixes, sacred histories, and conceptual grounds. In these circumstances, is it reasonable to declare that the disputants are equally true? Logically this appears to be a mistaken approach. However, since the Real *an sich* is beyond the scope of perceptual and conceptual knowledge, one cannot justify religious claims merely on the basis of evidence or proofs. If it is so, then it is wrong to propose that some kind of rational criteria can play the role of an arbiter in religious disputes.

In view of these considerations, Hick has attempted to resolve the problem referred to above by saying that the

conflicting truth-claims are due to conflicting historical and trans-historical beliefs and incommensurable religious mythologies. Further to this, he is of the view that all human modes of religious expression are not perfect enough to succeed in giving a true picture of the Divine. When someone tries to explain his religious experiences, he has no choice but to use the terminology shaped by his cultural and religious environment. Hick claims that since the idea of the Real emerges from religious concepts[15] and theological schemes, which serves as lenses through which God is variously experienced,[16] people are equally justified in having belief in conflicting things about God. Hick is of the view that all religions are the product of both divine and human influences. They lead us to a conceptually affected awareness of God. As far as their cognitive aspects are concerned, all religions serve equally as vehicles of knowledge of God. But these vehicles of knowledge do not go beyond the epistemic boundaries of a cultural-oriented idea of the Real. God-talks belonging to a particular religious tradition give us a naively realist picture of the Truth. They can make us aware of the Real as far as the salvific activity of God is concerned, but they cannot lead to the knowledge of the Real in itself. From this what must be inferred is that all religious experiences are true in some sense of the word 'true'. For Hick they are 'true' in practical sense — they are 'true' insofar as they practically promote salvation/liberation in a society. If your faith in God helps you overcome self-centeredness, then your faith in God is 'true' in the practical sense. In this way Hick comes to the view that truth-value of all religions is empirically equivalent. As long as the goal of all religions is to produce transformed and reoriented saints, then all religions are on epistemic par with regard to the rest of their claims. The differences do not matter, only the most fundamental common features do.

The second answer to the question of justification of different truth-claims comes from Professor Keith Ward in his article, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions". It is a critical response to Pluralist account of the religious epistemology. Ward has taken issue with Hick on a number of points such as whether it is right to claim that all existing religious traditions are equally valid

modes of experience of the religious life. In his critical analysis of the Pluralist hypothesis, Ward claims that it is perched on a precarious position which cannot stand up to the onslaught of a rigorous inquiry. The main problem with Hick's hypothesis is that it treats many mutually contradictory truth-claims on a par without offering some compelling rationale. Hick's position is philosophically unacceptable to him as all truth-claims in his view are necessarily exclusive including Hick's. A truth-claim must affirm some reality, which necessarily excludes incompatible claims about the same thing. Hick denies this fundamental bit of logic, and logic is what Ward rigorously applies to the Pluralist objections. He denies that all religions can be equally true because religious disagreement is, in fact, possible. They cannot all be true because they are "fundamentally opposed morally and factually".[17] Hick's view, according to Ward, suffers from mistaking the epistemological problem (determining what is true) for the metaphysical one (what is objectively true). He may be right that all religions are apparently on epistemic par, but that does not justify Hick's claim that all religions do in fact teach the same thing about the same reality. The basic laws of logic tell us that it is not reasonable to conclude something from the mutually exclusive kinds of religious beliefs. Hick's position is epistemically derelict to take truth-claims seriously and apply rigorous rationality to justify these claims. Ward identifies three versions of Pluralism'. Extreme Pluralism" claims that all versions of religions are equally valid and do not make mutually exclusive claims; but his position is incoherent since the claims are obviously incompatible. "Hard Pluralism" affirms that religions initially appear to be exclusivist, but actually agree on fundamental features of religion after careful investigation. Ward is critical of hard Pluralism because the reduction of religion to moral transformation and reorientation to the transcendent is analytic and trivial. It is analytic and trivial because only religions that conform to this definition will be counted as religion. Religions, which lack this feature, will be excluded to produce the façade of universal agreement. It is trivial because it merely relocates the exclusivist to an abstract and general level since hard Pluralism makes its own truth claims.

More religions are admitted as valid, but others that do not meet the rather arbitrary definition are excluded. The tactic of hard Pluralism is rather rigged from the outset when "religious traditions are investigated. This label reflects an attitude that religions are not making truth-claims at all so cannot disagree.

According to Ward, Hard Pluralism makes three self-refuting claims. First, in claiming that the Real is ineffable, one actually admits to its existence. Second, in claiming that no truth-claims can be made of it, one makes the truth-claims about it. Third, though the Real is unknowable, hard Pluralism claims to know that all religions are equally valid ways of reorienting to it. In denying the possibility of making religious truth-claims, hard Pluralism actually ends up making a number of truth claims. The view is fundamentally illogical. In addition to this, hard Pluralism ascribes to religions what they do not claim for themselves. Ward opts for "soft Pluralism". In his view, all religions are partially true, but also make some false claims. While talking about the truth-value of different faith-claims as incompatible with one another, he recognizes that believers of different religions are justified in their belief that those who disagree with them are wrong. Exclusivism is thus rationally justified. Religious believers are within their epistemic right to be exclusivists. In fact, it is unreasonable to believe otherwise if each religious believer is justified in his or her beliefs. Ward is strongly of the opinion that "all serious claims to truth are exclusive. And there is no escape from judging between them while realizing the very limited criteria we have."[18]

The next move of Ward's argument is the claim that it is reasonable for a Christian believer to claim that his experiences are true because they are veridical and supported by such miraculous events as disclosure of God in the person of Jesus Christ. There may be veridical experiences in other religious traditions, but ultimately their veridicality would depend upon the question whether those experiences complement his own (the man of faith who believes in a particular religious tradition) otherwise they would be false. The argument Ward has developed seems to depend on the following two points. First, psychological

force and epistemic certainty provided to him by his personal experience naturally demands that his experiences must take precedence over the experiences other people have. Second, "if God acts to reveal at all, it is reasonable to think that at least one tradition will contain a normative truth about God."[19] We believe that since Ward has opted for soft Pluralism, he has no logical space to plead the hard Exclusivist claim that only the Christian tradition has a lock on the truth. Hence, he agrees with the view that despite diversity of experiences there is much in common among different religious traditions. According to Ward, if God as a creator and sustainer of the universe is expected to disclose his nature and purpose to human beings at various places and different times, diversity of experiences seems to be necessary. It is quite natural that people will interpret their experience in accordance with the conceptual frameworks available to them in their own cultures. How God is seen depends very much on the cultural backgrounds and personal orientation and temperament of the believers. Further the question of misunderstanding in view of the ambiguous nature of God's revelation cannot be ignored. However despite the ambiguous nature of God's revelation and misunderstandings rising due to lingua-cultural variations, it needs to be kept in mind that these religious experiences are not merely blind men's experience of an elephant. It is also wrong to equate Kantian blindness with the virtual blindness. Mostly, those who reported to have gone through religious experiences in every tradition were rationally sound, morally strong and were socially committed to charity, purity and justice. The general character of their reports was essentially the same. The end result of the experience was the transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.

There is no doubt that exclusivist attitude has played a great role in the promotion of each and every religious tradition. What the exclusivist attitude in religious consciousness sought was not to develop a certain kind of rational outlook but to exhort man to give heart to a particular picture of the Divine. Giving heart and immersing oneself in the experience of love is always something very exclusive, but it is always wrong for someone to claim that only he has loved and other people have not. Gnostics openly

repudiates this kind of thinking. They insist on an all-inclusive point of view in love. Hence whenever the lovers meet they recognize each other and behave respectfully and honourably among themselves. They know that God is one but his ways are many. Whenever the intuition of the eternal in the temporal occurs, it opens up the new way; but in the end every way turns up to be relative in respect to the experience of the Divine. Hence, Keith Ward's hypothesis that "if God acts to reveal at all, it is reasonable to think at least one tradition will contain a normative truth about God" is logically compelling yet spiritually hollow and meaningless. Ibn Arabi says that "whichever way you turn your face, there you will find a road which leads to God."[20] Further to this Ibn Arabi says: The Beloved that the lover is in love with, whatever quality He adorns Himself with, whatever garment He dresses Himself in, never gets confused and does not get attached to any single face. Though he himself sees the beauty from every face, he excuses those who get tied up with one of His faces."[21] Disagreements at this level of consciousness become null and void. But at the worldly level, agnostics accept the disagreements as a necessary payload. They know that God's experience cannot be described without being infected by the cultural background and personal temperament. In this context, it is not very strange to come across in different religions controversial spiritual discernments and contestable conceptions of God. Contradictions, conflict and disputes are necessary but merely veils and has nothing to do with the reality and being of God. Beyond the conceptualist line of argument, the exclusivist theory of Professor Keith Ward does not hold water.

Then there is a question pertaining to the claim that the particular faith tradition I have preferred is most nearly true. Obviously, in making such preferences this kind of conviction is necessary. Our preferential attitudes always carry psychological weight. No one should disagree with what I choose to adopt as a way of life. But this claim becomes highly contentious when Ward argues that there must be a normative tradition, and obviously that tradition is his own, which contains normative truth. The trouble with this argument is that it has been built on a complex question, which seems to presuppose certain truth one

must agree with. Logically speaking, it is impossible to decide as to what the ultimate truth is and what are the necessary criteria for a normative tradition that could lead to this truth. Indeed, one cannot impose an epistemic bar on any religious tradition to have conviction that it preaches the normative truth. However, since no rationally justified criteria are available to make judgement on religious claims, we do not have convincing grounds to say that our revelatory experience is a unique and final revelation of God and others' are not. We cannot reasonably claim 'that my own form of religious experience … is veridical and others' are not.'[22] In this way, no one except God is in a position to decide which religion is nearer to the Truth and on what grounds. D'Costa has rightly claimed, "there are no neutral criteria for adjudicating between religions."[23]

Keith Ward while arguing against Gaven D'Costa's position insists that there must be a 'general criteria of rationality to be applied in matters of human belief generally'.[24] It needs to be pointed out here that at the moment we are not talking about matters of human beliefs in general. General beliefs are held on the basis of rational justification. One has to justify his belief that P is P by offering rationally valid ground. One is required to conduct evidentialist inquiry in order to reach some indubitable conclusions. But here we are talking about religious beliefs, which are held on the basis of trust and faith, not on the logical grounds of evidence, proof and argument. In matters of religious faith, we cannot adopt a neutral, dispassionate and objective standpoint. In this context, Ward's claim that there must be a religious tradition that contains normative truth which could help find a more adequate view of the Real – is too speculative to be accepted. Further to this, we cannot take a decision on this issue from a neutral position in assessing religions. We cannot claim to have some neutral criteria to adjudicate between religious beliefs? Hence, Keith Ward's insistence on the view that there must be some canonical revelation, fails to lead us anywhere, Keith Ward seems to become aware of this problem when at the end of his critical assessment of D'Costa's viewpoint he himself declares, 'There is no question of a neutral adjudication between religions. It is unintelligible to think that one could decide between

religious beliefs.'[25] In addition, it is a commonplace fact that whenever the issue of comparison and contrast among religions is raised, it turns into a dispute, which cannot be resolved with the help of some rational argument. Only what one can do in this regard is to make some necessary interpretations to accommodate others' point of view. However, the problem is that interpretations and explanation ultimately are of no use. They lead us nowhere except to the wrong end of the bottle. The right way is to follow the rules and participate in the religious tradition one belongs to. The religious history and faith-claims of each and every religion emphasize the claim that there is no way to salvation except by taking part in accordance with the rules of worship and prayer. It is possible that one might come up with fairly reasonable criteria for underpinning the essential features of a normative tradition. But the activity of choosing criteria tends to be so programmatic that the presence of prejudice becomes inescapable in this activity. It is therefore quite natural that whenever a theologian belonging to a particular religious denomination attempts to evolve some normative criteria, he generally ends up in shaping a Procrustean bed, which he uses as a tool for cutting his opposing faith traditions to size.

This is the perspective in which I agree with Muslim Sufis who insist that one should hold fast to the religious tradition one belongs to without falling into the trap of religious intolerance and prejudice. Sufi masters also discourage to indulge in word chopping of petty theological issues. I also agree with their claim that all religious paths are epistemically efficacious, and all higher religious traditions ultimately lead to the knowledge of the same Truth. The problem of fallibility, if there is any, lies with the process of interpretation that depends on lingua-cultural contexts within which revelatory experiences take place. Since God is *ex hypothesi* hidden and beyond, the problem of conflicting knowledge-claims about God is too difficult to be resolved in this world. As an unprejudiced participant of Islamic tradition, I find it reasonable to claim that this problem will only be resolved in the Hereafter. Only then it would be possible for us to verify the truth. In this life, however, the controversy will continue among the people who lack in knowledge of the truth.

My standpoint finds ample support from my own religious
tradition. Here I quote a verse from the Qur'ān to corroborate this
viewpoint: "Had God so willed, he would have made you one
community. But he has not done so, in order that he might prove
in regard to what has come to you. So strive to be foremost in
good deeds. You will all return to God, and then he will tell you
about things in which you have differed" (5:51).

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In the light of the above, I close this last section of my paper
with the remarks that since religious knowledge is essentially a
salvific knowledge — a process of transformation — it has
nothing to do with scientific or discursive knowledge. God by
definition is not a thing among things or an objective fact that
could be discussed by the ordinary rational process. The
evidentialist's demand that knowledge of God should be based on
proofs is entirely inappropriate. God is beyond notions and
concepts. Since the quest to know God is a salvation-oriented
project, it needs a lot of imperative to moral actions. The religious
moralism demands that the believer should work hard for the
implementation of God's will in establishing a just and decent
society for the people of God. A just and decent society can only
be established by practicing the virtues of compassion, love and
sacrifice. God is merciful, compassionate and caring, those who
believe in him are required to reject all kinds of cruel and
intolerant practices. The idea of monotheistic God implies that the
mankind must transcend the limitations of self-regard, ethnic
prejudices, and belligerent righteousness. Fundamentalism, in
monotheistic world-view, is a fiercely reductive faith — a curse,
which rejects the idea of a universal and compassionate God and
therefore ends up in epistemic blindness. The result is that instead
of knowing God we become even ignorant of the meaning, truth
and moral value of the belief in God. Jihadic tribalism, Crusade
based religious barbarism and Zionist colonialism have emerged
from the spiritual darkness of the Exclusivist world-views. These
are appalling things. These things are not only against the idea of
a universal God but also against the religious imperative of

establishing a just, decent and egalitarian society, *i.e.* the Kingdom of God — on earth. John, in his First Letter, says:

> We can be sure that we know God
> only by keeping his commandments.
> Anyone who says, 'I know him',
> and does not keep his commandments,
> is a liar,
> refusing to admit the truth.
>
> (Jerusalem Bible, John 1)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1   Cf. *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and David Shatz, p. 298.

2   Ghazali has narrated this story in his *Kimiya-i-Sa'adat* (Tehran: 1319 A. H. Solar), *i*, 50-51.

3   Ibn Arabi, *Kernel of the Kernel* (United Kingdom: 1990), p. 41.

4   Fazlur Rahman, The People of the Book in Griffiths, *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes*, 107.

5   Cf. Keith Ward, *Divine Action*, 1990, p. 201.

6   Cf. J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 307.

7   *Ibid*, pp. 235-6.

8   *Ibid*, p. 241.

9   *Ibid*, p. 236.

10 John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and Philosophy of Religion* (1993), p. 159.

11 J. Hick, *Op. cit.*, p. 258.

12 The writer has the honour to listen to John Hick's Lecture in 1989 in the Department of Philosophy and Religion, King's College, Strand, London. My supervisor Professor Keith Ward who was then the Head of the said Department very kindly introduced me to Professor Hick. I still remember a saintly smile on Hick's face.

13 John Hick has himself brought out these conflicting truth-claims at p. 362 of his book, *The Interpretation of Religion*.

14   John Hick, in *Faith* ed. Penelhum, p. 189.

15   J. Hick, *Op. cit.*, p. 249.

16   J. Hick and E. S. Meltzer (eds.), *Three Faiths, One God* (1987), p. 197.

17   Keith Ward, 'Truth and the Diversity of Religions', in Phillip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker, eds. *The Philosophical Challenges of Religious Pluralism* (2000), p. 110.

18   K. Ward, *Divine Action*, 1990, p. 199.

19   *Ibid*, p. 228.

20   Ibn Arabi, *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

21   *Ibid*, p. 26.

22   J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 235.

23   D'Costa, Whose Objectivity? Which Neutrality? *Religious Studies* (Cambridge), Volume 29, 1993.

24   Cf. K. Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (1994), p. 323.

25   *Ibid*, p. 323.