

## **The Misconceptions of Religious Pluralism and Religious Plurality held by Muslims in Malaysia\***

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### **Abstract**

This paper reviews the concepts of religious pluralism and religious plurality in works written by both Western and Muslim scholars. Religious pluralism in the West, its causes of origin, differences in opinion amongst Western scholars, and its influence on the Muslim world are presented. The paper finds that in Muslim countries such as Malaysia, there are people who propagate religious pluralism and there

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are people who oppose it completely. Between those who propagate and those who oppose, there are also those who partially understand or completely do not understand at all the philosophy of religious pluralism. There are some scholars, however, who agree with religious plurality (diversity), but they are often mistaken by others who are not familiar with the subtle differences between “pluralism” and “plurality.”

**Keywords**

Religious pluralism, plurality, *Tawhīd*, equality of religions, philosophy, Truth, Islam.

**Introduction**

Religious pluralism has become a topic of public debate in Malaysia for the past decade. At first, religious pluralism was only discussed at an academic level, leaving the public unaware of the existence of such philosophy. Later, such a discussion made its way to the realm of public and political debate. In response, JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia / Department of Islamic Development Malaysia)—a government agency—had to intervene in order to provide official guidelines to the public about the real meaning and the implications of religious pluralism in the context of Malaysia. It is within this context that this paper is written to demystify misconceptions about the two similar but different concepts, that is, religious “pluralism” and religious “plurality.”

It is crucial to discuss at this point that there are two different definitions of religious pluralism: one propagated by John Hick and the other by Diana L. Eck. Hick’s definition focuses on the theological aspect, while Eck’s focuses on the practicality of religious diversity.<sup>1</sup> As Muslims, if the meaning

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1. Haslina Ibrahim, “The Quest for Objectivity: Religious Pluralism and Religious Plurality in Malaysia. Roundtable Seminar on Religious Pluralism,” hereinafter cited as “The Quest for Objectivity.” *Kuliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences* (2015): 1–7.

of religious pluralism from the viewpoint of Hick is accepted, then it may lead to apostasy because it absolutely negates the ultimate teaching of Islam, that is, *Tawhīd*.

Some may think that “pluralism” and “plurality” have the same meaning since both words share the same root word “plural.” However, each word respectively holds completely different meaning. Pluralism refers to a philosophy or an ideology; while plurality is only a concept of variety (of anything). As a philosophy, pluralism denotes “a doctrine that there are more than two kinds of ultimate reality, as opposed to monism (belief in one entity) and dualism (belief in two entities). The many entities may be considered as material or spiritual or both.”<sup>2</sup>

The first idea of pluralism refers to the disputation of the One and Many in Greek ancient times. Pluralism is the opposite of monism and dualism. Monism is about reality as a unitary organic whole, while dualism, which is about nature, is composed of two substances, for instance, the world and God, the natural and supernatural, the temporal, and the eternal etc.<sup>3</sup> Whereas plurality is “the fact or state of being plural.” Pluralistic philosophy “relates to a system of thought that recognizes more than one ultimate principle.”<sup>4</sup> Apart from that, there are scholars who use the term “religious plurality” to denote the philosophy of religious pluralism. The religious philosophy traces back to the abovementioned philosophies, thus requires further insights.

## **Religious Plurality**

It is noteworthy to mention here that this sub-heading is about religious plurality, but in the subsequent discussion, the term

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2. Dictionary.com, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/pluralism?s=t> (accessed 4 November 2020).
  3. Haslina Ibrahim, *Exploring Religious Pluralism: Christian and Muslim Responses* (Batu Caves, Selangor: Islamic and Strategic Studies Institute (ISSI), 2016), 17.
  4. Lexico.com, Oxford University Press, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/pluralistic> (accessed 4 November 2020).

“religious pluralism” will be used interchangeably since most scholars, if not all, who write on this subject believe the meaning of both terms are similar.

According to Edward Craig, pluralism is relevant to any doctrine which upholds that there are ultimately many things, or many kinds of thing. The word is frequently used in the late 20th century philosophy to describe views which recognise many sets of equally correct beliefs or evaluative standards. Societies are sometimes called “pluralistic”, meaning that they combine a variety of ways of life, moral standards, and religions.<sup>5</sup>

For Thomas Banchoff, religious pluralism is defined as an interaction between religious groups in societies and politics. The term “religious pluralism” describes a social and political phenomenon and does not suggest a variety of ways to one truth or the superiority of the American society over other forms of social and political organisation.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Peter L. Berger relates pluralism with the acceptance of democracy which results from globalisation and almost all societies today are inevitable from being pluralistic.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it shows that Craig, Banchoff, and Berger understand religious pluralism from the perspective of politics and the plurality of religious beliefs.

Göran Collste interprets religious pluralism as a condition where there exist more than one religion in a society. It will not exist in a nation that only has one and the same religion or none at all. Societies that are categorised by religious pluralism can differ depending on the number of religions represented. They can also differ based on how the religions relate to one another and to the state. Hence, the conditions for religious coexistence are dependent both on the religions and on the state. Religions may be tolerant towards each other.<sup>8</sup>

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5. Edward Craig, s.v. “Pluralism,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780415249126-N042-1>.

6. Thomas F. Banchoff, ed., *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

7. Peter L. Berger, “Pluralism, Protestantization, and the Voluntary Principle,” *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19.

8. Göran Collste, “Possibilities of Religious Pluralism,” *Linköping University Electronic Press* no. 3 (2005), 9.

Another scholar who denotes religious pluralism to plurality and whose discourses are generally cited is Diana L. Eck. She developed The Pluralism Project at Harvard University. The project is aimed at studying and documenting the growing religious diversity of the United States. She explains the meaning of pluralism in four points. First, pluralism is not only acknowledging diversity, but the energetic engagement with diversity. Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference. Tolerance is an essential public virtue, but it does not require Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and dedicated secularists to know anything about one another. Third, pluralism is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments. It does not require people to leave their identities and commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. And fourth, pluralism is based on dialogue. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. Dialogue means both speaking and listening, a process that reveals both common understandings and real differences.<sup>9</sup> Apparently, all the aforementioned scholars expound religious pluralism in its generic sense, which is diversity or plurality of religions.

On the one hand, Craig believes that pluralism is applicable to any doctrine which maintains that there are ultimately various things, or various kinds of thing as well as religion. Corresponding to this, Banchoff and Berger interpret the meaning of religious pluralism as religious diversity but from the perspective of politics. In comparison to Collste, Craig believes that the existence of more than one religions in society will have an effect to religious co-existence in that country. While Eck is deeply interested in the pragmatic meaning and the forbearance of the prime objective of religious pluralism resulting from the existence of different religions.

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9. Diana L. Eck, "From Diversity to Pluralism" in *On Common Ground: World Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 1-3.

On the other hand, there are Muslim scholars who use the term religious plurality and pluralism interchangeably. Abdulaziz Sachedina views religious pluralism as a diversity of religious beliefs that exist in this world. He bases his idea of religious pluralism on a verse mentioned in the Qur'ān.<sup>10</sup> In the verse, there are three statements related to religious pluralism, that is, first: the unity of human beings under One God, second: the particularity of religions brought by the prophets, and third: the role of revelation in resolving the differences that touch communities of faith. Besides, religious pluralism emphasises the active engagement with other religions to understand, cooperate and remove ignorance of their religions. Thus, religious pluralism is not merely toleration amongst different faiths; rather it allows adherents of different religions to ascribe to intrinsic value in competing religious way of life.<sup>11</sup> Sachedina subscribes to the generic meaning of religious pluralism which is plurality of religious faiths.

Tariq Ramadan believes that Islam accepts pluralism by fully respecting the convictions of the other religious beliefs. Religious pluralism is defined as plurality which has been chosen by the Transcendent, that He is the God of all beings, and that He requires that each be respected. The wisdom behind the diversity of religious faiths is to test humankind in order to discover what they are going to do with what has been revealed to them and to use these differences in order to “compete in doing good.” Besides, the diversity of religions, nations, and peoples will require humans to learn the ways of managing differences. If there were no differences among people, or if power rests in the hands of one group alone (one nation, one race, or one religion), the earth would be corrupt because human beings need others to limit their impulsive desire for expansion and

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10. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 213.

11. Abdulaziz Sachedina, ‘The Qur’ān on Religious Pluralism’, *The Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding: History and International Affairs Georgetown University*, 2005, 18.

domination. Thus, the plurality of religions is essential because Allāh wants to test the faith of humans and encourage them to compete in doing good deeds only for Him.<sup>12</sup>

Adnan Aslan states that religious pluralism is rooted from some Qur'ānic principles which he coins it as "Islamic Pluralism". He further explains that one heavenly religion cannot be but an ally of another heavenly religion, so Muslims are able to participate in the essence and the "religious proximity" of other traditions. Moreover, the multiplicity of races, colours, communities, and religions are regarded as the signs of God's mercy and glory, exhibited through His creatures.<sup>13</sup> This basically refers to the plurality of religions and not included in the definition of religious pluralism by John Hick as the equality of all religions.

### **Religious Pluralism**

According to John Hick, religious pluralism is a philosophy which stems from Christian theology. Hick claims that all religions aim for the same Truth, but they advocate different paths to the same Truth based on their different religio-cultural-political teachings. Hick's religious pluralism rejects the Christian traditional idea of exclusivism which propagates that Christianity is the only truth, hence the only path to salvation. Religious pluralism can also be regarded as an alternative concept to inclusivism which upholds the idea of Christianity at the centre, being the religion that possesses the whole truth, hence, the valid way of salvation.<sup>14</sup>

Hick states that there are some existing world religions which have their own concept of God by wherein their God can be differentiated between the Real God and the God that

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12. Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, version 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 200.

13. Adnan Aslan, "Religious Pluralism in Islam," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 1, no. 2 (2011): 35–47.

14. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, version 2, 2nd. ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), XXXVI

is perceived by humans as they experience it in their lives. He explains it further by giving example of Hinduism, which takes *Brahman Nirguna* as their God. The *Brahman Nirguna* is without attributes and is perceived by humans with His attributes that are known as *Ishvara*, God as God in Himself, the creator and governor of everything. Hick also makes a comparison with the Muslim Sufi term related to *al-Haqq* (the Truth), which he claims to be identical to *En Soph*, the indescribable God, and the abyss of the Godhead which is the Divine Truth. Hick refers to Paul Tillich who claims about God above the God of theism. He agrees with the opinion of Gordon Kaufman, which differentiates between the Real God and from a human perspective, the available God. Therefore, every image of God, whether from a theistic or non-theistic religion, are being shaped according to the culture and the history of religions, and every culture and history has a different way of perceiving their God, but the actual God they refer to is the same, the Real God.<sup>15</sup>

### **Religious Plurality and Religious Pluralism**

Religious plurality can be paralleled with the term “religious coexistence.” It is defined as a multiplicity of religious groupings or precisely to the phenomenon of religious diversity. In other words, it is understood as many or plural religions in a society or community which are living harmoniously and peacefully. Diversity or plurality not only takes place in religions, but it is also available in many instances, such as, languages, races, skin colours and others. This is in line with Islam as Allāh highlights the plural phenomenon in this world as the Sign (*al-Ayah*) of His supremacy as the Creator of the universe, as stated in *Sūrah al-Rūm*<sup>16</sup> and *Sūrah al-Shūrā*.<sup>17</sup> Both verses clearly indicate

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15. Muhammad 'Uthman El-Muhammady, *Falsafah Agama John Hick: Pengamatan Dari Kacamata Ajaran Ahli Sunnah Wal-Jamaah* (Kuala Lumpur: Pertubuhan Muafakat Sejahtera Masyarakat Malaysia, 2012), 99.

16. *Al-Rūm* (30): 22.

17. *Al-Shūrā* (42): 29.



that universal diversity is the human reality and destiny, and it is among the signs and wonders of Allāh, establishing Allāh's supremacy in each of His creations.<sup>18</sup> Thus, religious plurality is a concept that acknowledges the fact that there are other religions existing in this world, but all of them have a different aim for their Truth.

Meanwhile, religious pluralism is a philosophy which claims all religions aim for the same Truth, but they advocate different paths to the same Truth based on their different religio-cultural-political context. Hence, no religion can claim their religions to be the only valid way to reach the Truth. Therefore, based on this distinction, it is incorrect to say that religious pluralism is the same as religious plurality.<sup>19</sup>

### **Main Propagators of Religious Pluralism in the West and the Differences Within**

John Hick was the father,<sup>20</sup> founder,<sup>21</sup> famous propagator,<sup>22</sup> and defender<sup>23</sup> of religious pluralism as he was the first person to coin the term “religious pluralism” and introduced it as a philosophy which stems from Christian theology. Hick claims

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18. Haslina Ibrahim, *Exploring Religious Pluralism*, 148.

19. Seyed Hassan Hosseini. “Religious Pluralism and Pluralistic Religion: John Hick’s Epistemological Foundation of Religious Pluralism and an Explanation of Islamic Epistemology toward Diversity of Unique Religion.” *The Pluralist* 5, no. 1 (2010): 94–109 accessed 16 February, 2021. doi:10.5406/pluralist.5.1.0094.

20. Haslina Ibrahim, “*The Quest for Objectivity*,” 1–7.

21. Mohamad Azmarul Danish Bin Azman, “Epistemology Discussion on Pluralism: A Comparative Study between West and Islam”, *3rd International Seminar on Islamic Thought*, n.d., 40–44.

22. Arif Kemil Abdullah, *The Qur’an and Normative Religious Pluralism: A Thematic Study of the Qur’an* (Herndon VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2014), 2.

23. Élise Rouméas, “What Is Religious Pluralism?” in *Religious Pluralism: A Resource Book*, ed. Aurélie Bardon, Maria Birnbaum, Lois Lee and Kristina Stoekl (Florence: European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, ReligioWest, 2015), 12.

that all religions aim for the same Truth, but they advocate different paths to the same Truth based on their different religio-cultural-political context.<sup>24</sup>

Before John Hick, the earlier development of religious pluralism took place in the hands of Wilfred Cantwell Smith,<sup>25</sup> who rejects the exclusive meaning of religion that propagates religion as an identity which consists of a system of ideas or beliefs and practices.<sup>26</sup> Smith also rejects all the meanings of religion as developed in the western discourse, claiming that they are distorted, confusing and leading to exclusiveness of religion. It is understandable that he dismissed the word “religion” altogether since he believes that personal faith is needed to progress in understanding the traditions of other people across history and across the world.<sup>27</sup> Smith equates religion with tradition which is relative to one’s context. He was confident that it is a culture that conceptualises the aspects of human life and society. Religion, according to Smith, is a product of culture handed down from one generation to another;<sup>28</sup> a cumulative tradition. This means that religion cannot be exclusive.

Another proponent of religious pluralism is Frithjof Schuon who based his idea of religious pluralism under the Transcendent Unity of Religions. For Schuon, the unity of the religious forms must be realised in a purely inward and spiritual way and without prejudice to any form. The antagonisms between these forms has no effect on the One Universal Truth, just as that of the antagonisms between opposing colours on

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24. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, version 2. ed, 2. ed (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

25. Haslina Ibrahim, *Exploring Religious Pluralism*, 57.

26. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). First, religion is perceived in the sense of personal piety. Second and third, there is the usage that refers to an explicit system, whether of beliefs, practices, values or whatsoever. Lastly, religion is understood in a general superficial sense, of “a generic summation”, “religion in general.”

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

the one uncoloured light. Every colour, by its negation of darkness and its affirmation of light, provides the possibility of discovering the ray that makes it visible and of tracing this ray back to its luminous source, so all forms, all symbols, all religions, all dogmas, by their negation of error and their affirmation of Truth, make it possible to follow the ray of Revelation, which is none other than the ray of the Intellect, back to its Divine Source,<sup>29</sup> As an example, the Holy Ghost of Christianity is the impersonal God, which embraces the *Purusha* of Hinduism or *Buddhi* of Buddhism and *al-Rūh* and *al-ʿAql* of Sufism.<sup>30</sup>

Diana L. Eck is also another one of the prominent figures who have expounded the idea of religious pluralism in its generic meaning. She is deeply interested in the pragmatic meaning and the prime objective of religious pluralism which is tolerance as resulted from the existence of different religions.

Thus far, four well-known scholars from the West and their propagation of religious pluralism have been presented. However, their thoughts in this regard are not identical, but instead, differ from each other. For Smith, religious pluralism is understood as respecting one's faith which is the result from one's culture that they live in and the differences of religious life should be celebrated. Hick is much more concerned with the idea of soteriological character of religion which disposes the idea that every religion has its own perceptions and interpretations of salvation. The idea of salvation that exists in many religions is only general and does not provide an in-depth understanding of it. Meanwhile, the idea of the Transcendent Unity of Religions by Schuon is related to the metaphysical ground as compared to Hick and Smith who focused on the philosophical ground of religious pluralism. Eck brought religious pluralism away from its theological bedrock. In comparison to Hick who was interested in reforming theology (Christian theology) and theology of

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29. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions, A Quest Book* (Wheaton, Ill.T: Theosophical Publishing House, 1984), XXXIV.

30. Haslina Ibrahim, *Exploring Religious Pluralism*, 17

religions, Eck is much more interested in the pragmatic meaning and the prime objective of religious pluralism, which is tolerance.

Religious pluralism clearly had started in the West, and then gradually infiltrated into the Muslim world. How did this religious philosophy introduce itself and influence individuals in the Muslim land? This will be addressed accordingly.

### **Muslim Scholars' Views on Religious Pluralism**

Since religious pluralism possess diverse definition, Muslim scholars' definitions also vary from one to another although some still uphold the generic sense and others adhere to the philosophical sense.

According to Mahmoud Ayoub, religious pluralism recognises all theistic religions to have legitimate ways to the Truth or Ultimate Reality. The followers of every religion have the right to regard their own faith as the true one for them. In addition, the need for everlasting salvation in some form is common to at least all major religions; no one way should be privileged as the only way to salvation. This echoes the claim of Hick. Ayoub also has highlighted in his article on the verses of the Qur'ān that suggest this philosophy. One of the verses is in *Sūrah al-Hajj*.<sup>31</sup> The verse lists the legitimate religions and then mentions those who associate other beings or things with God alone as the people with no legitimate religion. Thus, the legitimate religions here according to Ayoub include every religion that does not commit association between God and others even though their God is not Allāh that Muslims believe in.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Ayoub also admits religious pluralism in the philosophical sense in which all legitimate religions are equal in attaining salvation.

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31. *Al-Hajj* (22):17.

32. Mahmoud Ayoub, *ASEAN Religious Pluralism: The Challenges of Building a Socio-Cultural Community* (Bangkok, Thailand: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2014), 17–21.

According to Anis Malik Thoha, Seyyed Hossein Nasr is the supporter of the Transcendent Unity of Religions, that is, one of the trends propagating religious pluralism. Nasr had significantly extended the idea of Schuon of mysticism by imposing the need for a “sacred science (*Scientia sacra*).” It is the science which lies at the very centre of man’s being as well as at the heart of all orthodox and authentic religions and which is attainable by the intellect, whose inner faculties have not become atrophied by the deformations caused by the modern world. This principal knowledge is by nature rooted in the sacred, for it originates from the Reality which constitutes the Sacred as such. It is a knowledge which is also being, a unitive knowledge which transcends ultimately the dichotomy between the object and the subject in that Unity which is the source of all that is sacred and to which the experience of the sacred leads those who are able to reach the abode of that Unity.<sup>33</sup> According to Haslina Ibrahim, Nasr suggested that if comparative religion could be regarded as a sacred science, only then could the revealed forms and symbols of various religions be easily understood in their global and multi-religious context.<sup>34</sup>

Hussin Mutalib, a Singaporean scholar, claims that Islam accommodates diversity or plurality including religious pluralism as mentioned in the Qur’ān as translated: “To you your religion to us ours; for Truth and Falsehood are clear.” According to him, the verse vividly declares that religious plurality is allowed and there is no compulsion in religion and in religious choice. The very existence of plurality of races, religions and creeds are deliberate acts of God which has long been carried out since the time of Prophet Muhammad in Medina in the seventh century. In fact, the first written Constitution in the world, called the Medina Constitution (*al-Dustūr al-Madīnah*) in 622 A.D., guarantees a fair and equal treatment to all regardless of

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33. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Richmond: Curzon, 1993), 1.

34. Haslina Ibrahim, *Exploring Religious Pluralism*, 135.

race, religion, or creed.<sup>35</sup> It is clear here that Hussin Mutalib perceives religious pluralism as a plurality of religious beliefs.

In Indonesia, the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) issued a *fatwā* prohibiting the discussion of pluralism in 2005. Generally, the discussions on the re-construction of the Islamic tradition of pluralism have been quite vibrant in the past decade. In turn, this also provoked an equally intense response from the opponents. The idea of pluralism brings its proponents to an interfaith dialogue. The theological dialogue between Islam and Christianity reaches deep into the question of whether the two are equally valid.<sup>36</sup> Nurcholish Madjid is regarded as the father of religious pluralism in Indonesia together with the late former Indonesian President, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur). Nurcholish Madjid defines religious pluralism as the rule and law of Allāh that cannot be changed, resisted, or denied. Hence, religious pluralism and diversity undoubtedly are natural characteristics of human beings and societies.<sup>37</sup> Madjid develops his particular theory of Indonesian religious pluralism by referring to *Sūrah al-Imrān* in which God commands Prophet Muhammad to seek and find out *kalimah sawā'* (a common term) between the Muslims and People of the Book.<sup>38</sup> He urges Indonesian Muslims to consider Pancasila as the *kalimah sawā'* in the Indonesian context. Moreover, Pancasila is paralleled with the practice of the Prophet for the people of Medina soon after he arrived at the city in the *hijrah* from Mecca, which is known

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35. Hussin Mutalib, *Religious Pluralism in Democratic Societies Challenges and Prospects for Southeast Asia, Europe, And the United States in the New Millennium* (Kuala Lumpur: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung & Malaysian Association for American Studies, 2010), 35.

36. Zainal Abidin Bagir and Suhadi Cholil, "The State of Religious Pluralism in Indonesia," *Pluralism Mapping Study* (2008): 11.

37. Arif Maulana, "Nurcholish Madjid and Beyond: An Analysis of the Contemporary Discourse on Religious Pluralism in Indonesia," Published Thesis (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2016), 1.

38. *Āli-Imrān* (3): 64.

later as *Ṣahīfat* or *Dustūr al-Madīnah* (the Constitution of Medina).<sup>39</sup> After Mađjid's death, his student, Budhy Munawar-Rachman continued and extended his version of religious pluralism.

Egyptian scholar Fathi Osman states that pluralism is an institutional form that acceptance of diversity takes in a particular society or in the world. It also requires a serious approach towards understanding others and positive cooperation for the betterment of all humanity. All human beings should enjoy equal rights and opportunities and they should fulfil equal obligations as citizens of a nation and of the world. Pluralism means that minority groups can participate fully and equally with the majority in the society yet maintain their identity and differences. Thus, religious pluralism can be defined as an absence of a single understanding of the truth; thus, a variety of beliefs and communities should exist together and enjoy equal legitimacy.<sup>40</sup> Fathi Osman understands the philosophy of religious pluralism as the equal right of truth-claim among diverse religions.

According to Yusuf al-Qaradhawi, religious pluralism can be interpreted as plurality of humanity in their religions, which happens with the will of God. Thus, it cannot be denied by anyone. However, this plurality exists with wisdom and goodness that can differentiate between human beings as well as other creations of God. Besides, humans are commanded to seek knowledge, they are given choices, and they may admit to any truth without coercion by God. This results in the diversity of their choices as mentioned in *Sūrah Hūd*.<sup>41</sup> In order to preserve the existence of plurality from any conflicts between ethnics, races and religions, tolerance is highly needed. With tolerance,

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39. Anis Malik Thoḥa, "Discourse of Religious Pluralism in Indonesia," *Journal of Islam in Asia* vol. 2, no. 2 (December 2005): 111–30, 11–12.

40. Mohamed Fathi Osman, "The Children of Adam an Islamic Perspective on Pluralism," *Center for Muslim, Christian Understanding History and International Affairs* (blog), 2007, <http://cmje.usc.edu/articles/children-of-adam.php>.

41. *Hūd* (11): 118 and 119.

everyone will appreciate and respect others.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, al-Qaradhawi understands religious pluralism in the generic sense and associate it with religious tolerance. As a conclusion, Muslim scholars also echo the modern pluralists' understanding of religious pluralism which is first, religious plurality, and second, religious equality. Religious plurality concept is explained in the Qur'an but to equate religious plurality with religious pluralism is incorrect etymologically and philosophically. Religious pluralism is developed from the discussions of Christian Theology; thus, it is a vivid indication that this is not related to the teachings of Islam.

### **Malaysian Muslim Scholars' View on Religious Pluralism and Its Counter Responses**

Religious pluralism has influenced the thought of Muslims and attracted responses from various individuals and organisations. Malaysia has seen both the propagation and opposition to such a religious philosophy. Studies also show that there is debatable opinion of the philosophy, either completely or partially.

Historically, the discussion of religious pluralism has been very limited only to the academia from 2000. Haslina Ibrahim confirms that since the 1960's, there had only been three postgraduate research titles particularly on religious pluralism recorded in 2005. Indeed, religious pluralism has become one of the public debates in Malaysia since Anwar Ibrahim delivered a speech at the London School of Economics (LSE) on 18 March 2010. His call for religious pluralism was strongly rejected by religious institutions and Muslim NGOs in Malaysia. The strongest critics came from Muafakat led by Ismail Hj. Mina, who initiated several public discourses refuting

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42. Sukron Ma'mun, "Pluralisme Agama Dan Toleransi Dalam Islam Perspektif Yusuf Al-Qaradhawi," *Humaniora* 4, no. 2 (Oktober 2013): 1220–28, 1224.



Anwar Ibrahim.<sup>43</sup> In the Malaysian context, the definitions of religious pluralism are divided into its generic and philosophical sense. The generic meaning of religious pluralism which is the plurality of religions has been supported by Anwar Ibrahim, Mohammad Fauzi Yaacob, Chandra Muzaffar, Hashim Kamali, Osman Bakar and the group, Sisters in Islam.

Anwar Ibrahim's support for religious pluralism is controversial. Based on his speech, he views it from the philosophical meaning of religious pluralism that is, the equality of all religions, he says:

“I believe I'm not alone in saying that for religious pluralism to flourish in a divided world, it is morally unacceptable to say to people of other faiths: We believe in our God and we believe we are right; You believe in your God, but what you believe in is wrong.” On the other hand, he refers religious pluralism as religious plurality thus: “But to say this is not to deny the reality of religious diversity for the Qur'ān also tells us clearly.”<sup>44</sup>

In the statement above, Anwar Ibrahim associates the meaning of religious pluralism in the generic and philosophical sense.

Another scholar in Malaysia, Chandra Muzaffar, defines religious pluralism as religious diversity. The harmonious co-existence of the followers of different religions within a particular place would be an example of religious pluralism at work. People are aware that conceptions of the Transcendent or God differ from religion to religion and there are unique and distinctive practices associated with the various faith communities, there

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43. Haslina Ibrahim, Rohaiza Abd. Rokis, and Wan Nurhasniah Wan Husin, “Muhibah Is Not Religious Pluralism: The Understanding of Religious Coexistence among Religious Leaders in Malaysia,” *TAFHIM: IKIM Journal of Islam and the Contemporary World* 9 (2016): 67–85.

44. Anwar Ibrahim, “Religion and Pluralism in a Divided World” (Lecture, London School of Economics, 18 March 2010), <http://islam1st.org/2012/08/religion-and-pluralism-in-divided-world.html> (accessed 17 June 2022)

are also certain values and principles that they share. Accepting similarities at one level while acknowledging differences in other spheres is what defines religious pluralism.<sup>45</sup>

Mohamed Fauzi Yaacob interprets religious pluralism in two definitions, which include its generic meaning. Basically, religious pluralism is understood as religious diversity or heterogeneity, which means a simple acknowledgement of many different religious groups active in any given geopolitical space under consideration and that there is a condition of harmonious co-existence between followers of different religions. The term also can be defined as a form of ecumenism where individuals of different religions hold dialogues and learn from one another without trying to convince the others of the correctness of their individual set of beliefs.<sup>46</sup>

According to Osman Bakar, religious pluralism can be interpreted as religious diversity since he uses the word “diversity” with “pluralism” interchangeably in his article entitled “Islam and the Challenge of Diversity and Pluralism: Must Islam Reform Itself?”<sup>47</sup> The idea of diversity and pluralism is explicitly mentioned in a number of places in the Qurʾān. This diversity of religions has three related purposes. First, to test humans in what Allāh gives them. Second, to inspire the different communities to strive in a race in all virtues. Third, to demonstrate to all communities that their goal is to serve and please Allāh. These purposes emphasise the human need for unity in diversity in collective life within the pluralistic community as well as the human challenge to its realisation. The Qurʾān also highlights the main principles of governing interreligious understanding and peace in the global human community.<sup>48</sup>

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45. Chandra Muzaffar, “Understanding Liberalism and Religious Pluralism,” *The Star Online*, 5 November 2014, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2014/11/05/understanding-liberalism-and-religious-pluralism/> (accessed 17 June 2022).

46. Mohamed Fauzi Yaacob, “The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in Malaysia,” *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 2011, 166–77, 1.

47. Osman Bakar, “Islam and the Challenge of Diversity and Pluralism: Must Islam Reform Itself?” *Pluto Journals, Islam and Civilisational Renewal: Islam and Pluralism*, no. ICR 1.1 (n.d.): 68.

48. *Ibid.*

Mohammad Hashim Kamali connotes religious pluralism as a recognition and acceptance of the different other for what one is, not necessarily embracing all that one may believe or disbelieve. Furthermore, he believes that Islām recognises all monotheistic religions and allows the followers of other religions to practice their own beliefs, personal laws and custom. Therefore, religious pluralism can be defined as recognition, co-existence, and cooperation with people of different religious beliefs within the same society. History has proven that Islam is the only religion that has demonstrated an absolute commitment to pluralism. It is not only the Qur’ān, but also the first constitution of Islam that is, “The Constitution of Medina” which is affirmative on religious pluralism.<sup>49</sup>

Next is the elucidation on Malaysian scholars who subscribe to the literal meaning of the philosophical meaning of religious pluralism but reject the philosophical meaning as it is incompatible with the *Tawḥīd* in perspective of Islām, whereas the technical meaning is an interpretive theory concerning how one should handle the many competing truth-claims made by various religions. It also can be understood by comparing religious pluralism with exclusivism and inclusivism. Exclusivism believes that only one religion is correct, and all others are mistaken. Meanwhile, inclusivism believes only one true religion exists, but other religions participate or partially reveal some of the truth of the authentic religion.<sup>50</sup> For Muslims, the ardent call of religious pluralism for “the many paths to salvation” is a challenge to their cardinal belief of *Tawḥīd* that rejects any association with Allāh.<sup>51</sup>

Among the significant works which rejects religious pluralism by influential scholars in Malaysia are works such as the one by Khalif Muammar. He defines religious pluralism

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49. Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “Islam’s Religious Pluralism in Context,” *IAIS Journal* 01, Islam and Civilisational Renewal, no. ICR 2.4 (n.d.): 715.

50. Haslina Ibrahim, *Exploring Religious Pluralism*, 9.

51. Haslina Ibrahim, et al. “Muhibah Is Not Religious Pluralism,” 67–85.

as an affirmation that all religions are the same and valid way to the same God. Nonetheless, Islam never rejects the concept of religious plurality and religious tolerance. He rejects this philosophy as it is an antithetical to *Tawhīd* and it contradicts the core teaching of all previous prophets.<sup>52</sup> During the 2006 *Ulama* Convention, the Mufti of Perak, Harussani Zakaria, had warned against pluralism and liberalism as they were threats to Islam and could lead Muslims to apostasy if they believed in them.<sup>53</sup> Wan Adli Wan Ramli also rejects the philosophy as it denies the concept of *Tawhīd* and affirms the equality of all religions, thus invalidating the Truth of Islam.<sup>54</sup>

Uthman El-Muhammady claims that were Muslims to accept the philosophy, then what has been revealed in the Qur’ān—on the requirement of humans to believe in the oneness of God by following the teachings of the Messengers and avoid associating (*Shirk*) anyone or anything with God—will all be meaningless. There would be no point of the Messenger being sent down to earth to teach *Tawhīd* to human beings, as everything about religion is derived from the history, culture, and mentality of the human races. Also, the role and characteristics of the Qur’ān as trustworthy scripture, a witness, and dominant over every other scripture that preceded it, and which abrogated and corrected the *Aqīdah*, practices and immorality of people will be futile.<sup>55</sup>

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52. Khalif Muammar, *Islam Dan Pluralisme Agama Memperkukuh Tawhid Di Zaman Kekeliruan* (Kuala Lumpur: CASIS UTM, 2013), 90.
  53. Rusli Abdul Roni, “Exploring the Perception of Religious Pluralism Issues among Private University’s (sic) Students,” *Proceedings of the Fourth Asia-Pacific Conference on Global Business, Economics, Finance and Social Sciences* (API5Malaysia Conference), 2015, 1–8.
  54. Wan Adli Wan Ramli, *Bahaya Liberalisme Dan Pluralisme Agama Terhadap Akidah Belia Muslim* (Johor Bahru: Majlis Agama Islam Negeri Johor, 2012), 36.
  55. Muhammad ‘Uthman El-Muhammady, *Falsafah Agama John Hick: Pengamatan Dari Kacamata Ajaran Ahli Sunnah Wal-Jamaah* (Kuala Lumpur: Pertubuhan Muafakat Sejahtera Masyarakat Malaysia, 2012), 15.

Mohd Aizam Mas'od states that religious pluralism refers to the equality of religions. In other words, religious pluralism means truthfulness exists in all religions and salvation can be attained from any religions. Thus, all religions are the same, any adherents of faiths are considered as Muslims and every human being, regardless of their faiths, can enter heaven. The differences of all religions are due to the different paths they have chosen but the aim is still the same which is God, and everyone will arrive at the same end. This very concept of religious pluralism is problematic in Islam since Islam holds on to *Tawhīd* with which Islam is propagated, affirming His oneness and rejecting all levels of association with Him. This is the only way to enter heaven in the sight of Allāh.<sup>56</sup>

What worries the opponents of religious pluralism is that there have been what they regard as symptoms of religious pluralism, for example, the rising number of cases of apostasy and conversion to other religions by Muslims, the demands to use the term of “Allāh” by the Christian groups, and the demands for equality of religions by the Interfaith Council (IFC).<sup>57</sup> In addition, Fauzi Yaacob thinks that religious pluralism has long existed in Malaysia as it has diversity of religious traditions, for example, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, animism, and other folk religions.<sup>58</sup>

Having presented these extensive meanings of philosophy, researchers may come to a conclusion that religious pluralism is a philosophy that claims that all religions aim for the same Truth, but advocate different paths to the same Truth based on one's different religio-cultural-political context. At the same

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56. Mohd. Aizam bin Mas'od, *Diskusi Isu Aqidah Dan Pemikiran Semasa Di Malaysia*, Cetakan pertama (Putrajaya: Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, 2013), 195.

57. Khadijah Mohd Khambali@Hambali, Wan Ariffin Wan Yon, and Suraya Sintang, “Toleransi Dan Pluralism Menurut Pengalaman Masyarakat Bidayah,” *Jurnal Usuluddin* 40 (2014): 99–133.

58. Mohamed Fauzi Yaacob, “The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in Malaysia,” 166–77.

time, religious plurality is a concept that acknowledges the fact that there are other religions existing in this world, but all of them have different aims for the Truth. Based on this distinction, it is incorrect to say that religious pluralism is the same as religious plurality. There are modern pluralists who subscribe to the generic meaning of religious pluralism as well as its philosophical meaning. Likewise, Muslim scholars and Malaysian Muslim scholars have different understandings of religious pluralism, but they are still in accord with the generic and philosophical meanings.

### **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, the first meaning of religious pluralism introduced by John Hick undoubtedly contradicts the concept of *Tawhīd* and risks the sin of *shirk* as it subscribes to the idea of religious equality. Religious pluralism is a philosophy that is spreading rapidly as compared to its succinct awareness two decades ago due to the overlapped meaning with religious plurality propagated by academics and researchers, locally and internationally.

It is essential for Muslim scholars to be able to explain the confusion that overshadows the word “religious pluralism.” The confusion lies in the understanding of and using religious plurality interchangeably with religious pluralism. The terms carry different meanings and implications. Furthermore, Muslim scholars should change the term used from “pluralism” to “plurality” or “diversity” so as to educate Muslims the exact meaning of religious pluralism. However, this confusion most likely will continue to exist due to the Muslims’ usage of the English language which is different from the Arabic language, as both the terms “pluralism” and “plurality” were coined by Western scholars.

As a summation, there are two major definitions of religious pluralism. Some scholars have defined religious pluralism in the sense of its literal meaning, while some others have understood it from its philosophical meaning. The literal

*The Misconceptions of Religious Pluralism*

meaning is understood as mere plurality of religions, while the philosophical meaning is perceived as equality in religions. Therefore, as Muslims, the philosophical meaning of religious pluralism should always be rejected without any reservation.

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