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***THE POSSIBILITY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN TURKEY AT
THE CROSSROAD OF THE TRADITIONAL AND GLOBAL
EXISTENCES***

Abstract: As a result of the interaction between religions, globalization has created a new context for various theories of religious pluralism. For the sake of brevity, the beginning of the 21st century witnesses that religious pluralism is one of the most basic challenges for different theologies of various traditional religions. Thence, religious pluralism is one with which all theologies are somehow expected to face.

Understanding cultural religious pluralism requires a high level of knowledge. Individuals or communities who have a sectarian mindset and believe that only their religion or denomination represent the truth have no share in this level. The Muslims, as long as they stay within the borders of Islam, can find no evidence in the Qur'an or in the other sources that supports their claim that they are possessed of the truth to the exclusion of others. Turkey, in respect of both its religious and political culture, has the experience of developing and designating the ideal of pluralism.

It is a necessity for the Turkish intelligentsia in general and for the members of the theology faculties in particular to promote and maintain the ideal of religious pluralism. It is an obligation for the actors above to support and assign this notion on account of the international community and Turkey's geopolitical position. In this paper, I analyse and give a critical definition of religious pluralism in search for the possibility of religious pluralism in Turkey.

Keywords: *Religious Pluralism, Turkey, Philosophy, Religion, Diversity, Culture.*

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INTRODUCTION

Religious pluralism is one of the most vibrant and moot topics in the contemporary philosophy of religion. This is in part due to the increasingly multicultural (multi-faith, multi-denominational) environment within which the philosophy of religion is now practiced and taught. What is more to the point, it is because thinking about theories of religious pluralism requires that one engage with some of the deepest questions lying at the heart of philosophy, in general. So, questions about philosophical methodology, the nature of truth, logic and language are very vital to examine and criticize the several forms of religious pluralism. Additionally, once we talk about religious pluralism, it seems to me that we need to ask philosophical questions about the truth value of various religions. Besides, it is a fact that globalization has brought about interaction between religions and religious communities. Through such interactions, as John Hick, the distinguished philosopher of religion, rightly points out, some religions, such as Christianity, have started to redefine some of their traditional doctrines whereas some others, such as Islam, have taken globalization as the incentive through which they intend to review their historical identity. As a result of the interaction between religions, globalization has created a new context for various theories of religious pluralism. For the sake of brevity, the beginning of the 21st century witnesses that religious pluralism is one of the most basic challenge for different theologies of various traditional religions. Thence, religious pluralism is one with which all theologies are somehow expected to cope. This explains why the philosophy of religion becomes most relevant in today's skirmish-imposing global ethos which has been the scene of the religious diversity and its emerging questions. This religious and philosophical context imposes and valorizes, covertly or overtly, the validity of other religious views and the integrity of other religious voices thorough the resuscitative "pneuma" of religious pluralism.

1. DEFINING RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The diversity of religions is a *fact*, but this needs to be carefully distinguished from the idea of religious pluralism which is advanced as a theoretical explanation for such a phenomenon. The question of the diversity of religious beliefs should be evident: each religion puts forward a different set of religious truth-claims ranging from the nature of God to the human salvation. There is, to start with, a significant difference between the theistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the non-theistic religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. The most common feature of the theistic religions is their agreement on the *personal* nature of God, a conviction which is not shared by the non-theistic

religions. However, there are further differences within the theistic as well as the non-theistic religions themselves. Thus, for instance, the doctrines of the divine trinity and incarnation, which are essential to the Christian faith, are in sharp contrast to the Islamic concept of deity, which forcefully underlines the absolute unity (oneness) and transcendence of God¹.

I differentiate between two types of religious pluralism. Of course, both have a different implication for religion and life. First, there is a mostly sociological use of the term which I will call the “cultural religious pluralism.” It indicates that in a given society there are a variety of religious traditions and the persons identifying with these traditions actively interact with one another in such a way that the traditions themselves are affected by this interaction. Religious pluralism in this usage is more than religious plurality. It is not simply another way to say there are many religious traditions observable in a society. It signifies more than religious diversity. It implies that these traditions are both different and engaged with one another, influencing one another, responding and reacting to one another through their members. Unless one is engaged with persons of other faiths as people of faith, religious pluralism is not an issue. One could just as well believe that only one’s faith is the true religion and everything else is false religion. In connection with this usage, religious pluralism has a socio-political meaning too, referring to the fact of the American experiment in democracy. By this I mean the separation of church and state, whereby no particular religious group or set of groups legally represents the minds, hearts and the interests of the citizenry². When it comes to Turkey, I can say that religious pluralism is guaranteed in Article 24 of the Turkish 1982 Constitution. “No one shall be allowed to exploit or abuse religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion, in any manner whatsoever, for the purpose of personal or political influence, or for even partially basing the fundamental, social, economic, political and legal order of the State on religious tenets.” I think that in our days, compared to the past, this article of the Constitution is interpreted and practiced in a more democratic and liberal manner, with the help of some reforms, to avoid discrimination and remove obstacles against the exercise of the full set of rights and freedoms by the members of the religious groups. But I must indicate that there are more things Turkey needs to do for assuring the full exercise of freedom of religion and the belief and the equal enjoyment of social, economic and political rights.

In the second place, there is the metaphysical use of the term religious pluralism, which is the claim that each religious tradition as such is a valid way in

¹ Mehmet Sait Reçber, “Ibn Al Arabi, Hick and Religious Pluralism,” *Asian and African Area Studies* No: 7/2 (2008): 145.

² William Skudlarek, *The Attentive Voice: Reflection on the Meaning and Practice of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Lantern Books, 2012), 48.

itself for addressing the human condition and connecting those who pursue that way with the ineffably Real and infinite Being, whom members of different religions call “God”, “Jahveh”, “Jesus”, “Allah”, “Brahman” and so forth.

The phenomenological use of the term “metaphysical religious pluralism” refers to the existence of a multitude of religious traditions and diversity of denominations within those traditions. In other words, it can be explained by the theory that “the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate, and that within each of them independently the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness is taking place.” So, from that point of view, religions are to be regarded as alternative soteriological ways through which all people can find salvation and fulfillment³. This view is now espoused by several authors in the field of the philosophy of religion. They present the result of decades of researches bringing to light the richness of the variety of the religious traditions in the world and the development of a method to explore these traditions, based upon religious experience. The methods of the philosophy of religion and also of the history of religion have revealed much to us about the meaning and the content of the religious beliefs and practices, and have advanced our understanding in the general field of religious studies. The acceptance of these methods does not imply that one has to accept the view that all religions are ultimately valid in themselves, the view that underlies a metaphysical understanding of religious pluralism. It seems to me that such a view involves reducing the diversity of various religions to a single essence or meaning and therefore that this would not be a view of true religious pluralism, but rather the equality of some really distinct religious traditions⁴. This may be the view that all religions are, in some ways, examples of a single form of religion. I have one parting comment about metaphysical religious pluralism. This particular understanding of religious pluralism seems inadmissible in that it does not give any place to revelation, as a special source of knowledge and also it reduces religion to morality⁵. So here, I am not using religious pluralism in a metaphysical sense, though I acknowledge the fact of religious pluralism. In this sense, I would like to use the term “cultural religious pluralism”.

³ John Hick, “Religious Pluralism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillan Reference Books, 1986), 331

⁴ Muhammad Legenhausen, “A Muslim’s Non Reductive Religious Pluralism,” in *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, ed. Roger Boase. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 52-53. See also: Thomas Banchoff, *Religious Pluralism, Globalization and World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 3-4.

⁵ Recep Kılıç, “Dini Çoğulculuk Mu, Dinde Çoğulculuk Mu,” *Dini Araştırmalar* Cilt 7/19 (2004): 16.

Cultural religious pluralism is based on a perspective which can lean towards the religious truth claims by putting some distance between them and us. This is not a kind of nihilism or skepticism. To put a distance between us and religions or religious truth claims signifies an attempt to look at them from outside. This is a situation that requires the accumulation of deep knowledge and also a high ability of empathy. The individuals or religious groups who have sectarian perspectives are far away from this situation and, for this very reason, they deserve critical analysis⁶.

The sociologist Peter Berger wrote that there are “three options that all contemporary religious communities now face: to resist pluralism, to withdraw from it, or to engage with it. None is without difficulties and risks, but only engagement is compatible with liberal democracy. Engagement means that the tradition is carried into the open discourse of the culture and that those who represent the tradition make unapologetic truth claims”⁷.

A religious truth-claim, whatever it is, must be duly respected, and should not be simplified or relativized, let alone negated or ignored. Because, from the Islamic point of view, faith in particular and religion in general are matters of conviction and sincerity. Thus, there should be no compulsion in religion. However, it should be added here that that conviction and sincerity meant above are not those of an emotional and uncritical stemming out of sheer desire. Rather, they are meant to be rational and critical, for Islam is a rational religion *par excellence*. In this matter of convincing and being convinced, Islam stringently observes a principle, “let the best argument win”⁸.

Turkey has the experience of developing and promoting the ideal of cultural religious pluralism in respect of its religious and political culture⁹. Putting aside the artificial conflicts resulting mostly from the political concerns, many denominations and sects of Islam and even other religions have, for centuries, peacefully coexisted in the Seljuk and the Ottoman Empire as well as in the Republic of Turkey. The strongest aspect of Turkey that can present itself as a

⁶ Siddık Korkmaz, “Türkiye’de Kültürel Dini Çoğulculuk Anlayışının İmkânı,” *Uluslararası Bilim, Ahlak ve Sanat Bağlamında Çağdaş İslam Algıları Sempozyumu*, Samsun, Ondokuz Mayıs Üniversitesi ve Canik Belediyesi, 26-28 Kasım, 2010, 280.

⁷ Peter Berger, “Religious Pluralism For a Pluralist Age,” *Project Syndicate* April 28, 2005, accessed July 15, 2014, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/religious-pluralism-for-a-pluralist-age>.

⁸ Anis Malik Thoha, “Religious Plurality: Myth or Reality?,” Discussion Paper, Unissula Institutional Repository, 2005, accessed July 15, 2014, <http://repository.unissula.ac.id/id/eprint/14>.

⁹ Carol Kersten, “Urbanization, Civil Society and Religious Pluralism in Indonesia and Turkey,” in *Religious Pluralism, State and Society in Asia*, ed. Chiara Formichi (New York: Routledge, 2014): 13.

model to the Turkish and Muslim world is its rich heritage of critical thought and scientific knowledge. If we, as the heirs of this rich history, want to have positive expectations from the future, we should improve the pluralist world view and introduce it in the favor of Muslims, along with humanity.

The respect for religious pluralism begins to shake when people advocate that only their religious principles are valid and their religious views should be codified as an eternal law. Of course, the followers of many religious traditions may have this kind of attitude. For instance, in Islam, the Neo-Salafî interpretation of Islam frequently declares *takfir* (accusing Muslims of being infidel), which certainly poses a threat to religious pluralism. Indeed, no Muslim, as long as he stays within the “authentic” borders of Islam in its broadest sense, can find any evidence in the Qur’ân supporting his / her claim of *takfir*. Hence, religious pluralism is to be internalized and turned into a collective ethos, thorough inner sincerity, cognitive and emotive construction, and outer praxes and expressions.

It is a necessity for the Turkish *intelligentsia* in general and for the members of the theology schools in particular to promote and maintain the ideal of cultural religious pluralism. It seems to me that it is an obligation for the Muslim scholars to support and promote this view, keeping in mind the international community and Turkey’s geopolitical position. Thus, unique religious groups can co-exist side by side and also consider the qualities of other religious groups as traits worth having in the dominant religion or culture.

I believe that, with the rise of neo-Salafism, the Islamic World stands in the borderline between religious totalitarianism and religious pluralism. It appears that the current political situations in the Middle East feed from neo-Salafism and, consequently, from religious totalitarianism. It appears that today there are two great challenges to the discourse of religious pluralism that has been nourished on American soils:

- 1) Christian evangelical fundamentalism
- 2) Neo-Salafi Islamic movement.

Especially the Muslim minorities in the West, because of their sociological context, are vulnerable to fanatic and neo-Salafî understanding, to a totalitarian religious approach. Therefore, to counter this development, a new philosophical and intellectual interpretation of Islam is urgently needed. Besides, many other programs, philosophical underpinnings of religious pluralism, must be strongly emphasized and constantly kept high on the agenda.

2. THE POSSIBILITY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN TURKEY

Turkey has the experience of diverse cultures, religions and languages. Turkey is, by definition, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country that bears

within it both the multicultural tolerance tradition of the Ottoman Empire and its *millet* arrangements. It straddles Europe and Asia and has a population of over 76 million, about three-quarters of them ethnic Turks. The next largest ethnic group are the Kurds, with smaller numbers of ethnic Arabs, Circassians, Armenians, Laz, Georgians, Greeks, Jews and others. An estimated 99 per cent of the population are of a Muslim background, mainly Sunnis, with 6 to 8 per cent of the population being Alevis, and very small numbers of Shias. The largest non-Muslim religious communities are the Christians, with the Armenian Apostolic being the largest church, followed by the Syrian Orthodox, the Greek Orthodox, Catholics of various rites and Protestants. Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses are present in smaller numbers.

Does Turkey still have the ability to maintain and flourish religious pluralism? After the foundation of the Republic, Turkey has gained the ability of producing more reliable knowledge about religion by turning *madrasas* (traditional institutions of religious education) into theology faculties. The main aim of these faculties is to find out the ways to establish a balance between science and religion. Therefore, away from dogmatic thinking, research and inquiry based studies are carried out in these faculties. Lying at the heart of the long-established tradition, the Turkish faculties of theology have taken it upon themselves to convey to the future generations this vast body of Islamic sciences that have remained intact to the present day, after a centuries-long developing phase. Moreover, the students studying Islamic theology in Turkey have the opportunity to study Islamic sciences, with all this richness, without plunging into the bigotry or fanaticism of promoting any of the particular schools of thought or jurisprudence to the exclusion of others. In addition, unlike other Islamic countries, the faculties of theology in Turkey teach Islamic sciences accompanied by philosophy, religious studies, Islamic art and literature, and, in this way, students are given the information they need to embrace the idea of cultural religious pluralism, namely to look at one's own religious beliefs and convictions from a distance and also to try to see our beliefs and convictions from the perspective of a person who does not share them with us.

These modern institutions, staying away from dogmatism, seek the balance between religion and science and conduct studies based on objective research and enquiry. With the studies and researches conducted in these faculties, many esoteric religious groups, which used to be considered as secret communities, have become civil societies conducting legal and philanthropic activities. Most of these religious groups are mystic Sufi organizations. Even some sectarian religious groups, such as Baktashi and Alawi, feel compelled to be public and to re-form their secret oral teachings. All of these developments indicate the possibility of an intra-Islamic pluralism in Turkey. As long as positive views are adopted, as long as objectivity, science and truth are valued, and as long as emotionally charged nostalgia-ridden

mythological desires are not promoted, there is a possibility for religious pluralism in Turkey.

As it stands, despite some isolated events, Turkey succeeds in managing religious diversity because the perception of Islam has developed in connection with a variety of current and historical events and variables. The perception that emerged in the course of the Turkish social, cultural and political history provides strong grounds for a peaceful co-existence within the shared social order. Turkey's achievement in establishing a political culture and a perception of Islam that facilitates religious pluralism can be attributed to numerous factors. These factors range from democracy and secularism to the perception of Islam and Turkey's efforts to join the European Union. However, it should be noted that, although we have achieved considerable success, we still need to make more improvements in these areas¹⁰.

Secularism and the culture of democracy in Turkey likewise provide principles that are crucially important for the protection of pluralism and freedoms. By embracing democracy, the rule of law and secularism, Turkey has chosen a path that enables people of various backgrounds to live peacefully in the same social and political order, without abandoning their culture, religion or identity. Structural and legal provisions, as well as their social acceptance by the majority of Turkish citizens, have led to the establishment of individual freedom of religious belief and practice, as well as to the freedom of expression, as far as interpreting religion is concerned, i.e. what might be called intra-religious freedom or freedom within a religion. This is one of the peculiar characteristics of the modern Turkey of today.

Does Turkey want to continue with different religious groups or does it desire to transform the existing pluralistic religious landscape to a rather monolithic structure, comprising only one religion (namely, the Sunni-Salafi interpretation of Islam) which dominates the whole landscape? Even though the ruling Islamic elites of Turkey desire the last option and try to implement some sinister policies in that direction, I believe and hope the cultural and historical realities of Anatolian geography do not and will not allow such monolithic aspirations. Turkey needs to benefit from the culture of religious pluralism which has existed for a long time in this land. The European Union like projects that unite people which are different in terms of ethnicity, language and religion, have existed for a long time in this part of the world. Ignoring the existing differences in Turkey can be perceived as a kind of self-denial, an alienation from its authentic identity. Inter-religious or intra-religion differentiations are the result of globalization. Contemporary development in communication and transportation turned the whole

¹⁰ Ali Bardakoğlu, "Culture of Co-existence in Islam: The Turkish Case," *Insight Turkey*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2008): 121.

world into a small village. Therefore, in such a global context, ignoring religious pluralism is as ridiculous as hiding one's head in the sand. Therefore, religious pluralism needs to be accepted as a reality and the traditional understanding of salvation, which requires loyalty to one religion, needs to be abandoned. Furthermore, individual forms of religiosity need to be promoted. Authoritarian monolithic political systems are outdated. Turkey, focusing on individuals and human rights, must value its pluralistic structure and must consider the differences - whether inter-religious or intra-Islamic - as a treasure¹¹.

After decades of official neglect and mistrust, Turkey has taken several steps to ensure the rights of the country's non-Muslim religious minorities and thus to guarantee that the rule of the law is applied equally for all Turkish citizens, regardless of religion, ethnicity and language. Besides political considerations and values, I think the social and religious history also entails Turkey keeping religious pluralism on the agenda. When we look at the history of Turkey, the relations of the Muslims with the non-Muslims have been dominantly a matter of Islamic jurisprudence. As Aslan argues, Muslims have not seen this as an issue of faith or theology. The absence of a theological consideration of the issue lies in the Muslim conviction that only God can know who has a genuine faith and therefore deserves salvation¹². Although traditionally the content of this conviction was not extended to include non-Muslims, we may expand the circle of the saved ones in the light of the verse, "As for those who strive hard in Us, We will surely guide them to Our Paths."¹³

CONCLUSION

It seems to me that Turkey is experiencing the golden age of religious pluralism and as long as Turkey pursues its EU target, the quality of its democracy and freedoms will improve further and thus, by getting rid of its fears, a prosperous, developed and powerful Turkey will be characterized by a religious pluralism in an ideal sense.

Religious pluralism, in the sense of the unification of religions, cannot be advocated in terms of historical and current experiences. All movements which attempt to realize such an objective will eventually turn into a separate sectarian religious movement. In history, there are many examples of such religious

¹¹ Korkmaz, "Türkiye'de Kültürel Dini Çoğulculuk," 290.

¹² Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy: The Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 186; Mustafa Rüzgar, "Islam and Deep Religious Pluralism," in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 159-162.

¹³ *Al-Ankabut*, 69.

formations. It is possible to develop religious pluralism based on tolerance and respect among the members of a religion. When we look at history, we can see that, when Muslims were in power, the members of other religions lived in peace and were able to transmit their beliefs to the next generation. However, when Islam lost its power, they faced great cruelty and oppression. Therefore, in Turkey, religious pluralism should be preserved and transferred to the future generations as cultural wealth. Especially, religious formations relative to the Sufi tradition could take a few steps forward, considering the structure of their cultural background. Formations within Islam have much to do in terms of developing religious pluralism. For instance, the heads of the cults and religious communions should receive an advanced religious education.

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