

4.3 TRANSCENDING PLURALISM Joas Adiprasetya final-edited.pdf

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TRANSCENDING PLURALISM, CELEBRATING FRIENDSHIP

Joas Adiprasetya

The Inadequacy of Pluralism

“Pluralism” is a highly ambiguous term in religious circles, especially since the term “religious” is complex and multifaceted. James A. Beckford's monumental work, *Social Theory and Religion* (2003), has clearly explained three different meanings of religious pluralism: pluralism as the fact of diversity, pluralism as acceptance or recognition, and pluralism as value (Beckford 2003, 74-81). His starting point in differentiating the three meanings is the distinction between the *descriptive* and *normative* usages of “pluralism” (Beckford 2003, 78).^[2] While the former refers to the fact of religious diversity (*pluralism* or *plurality*), the later comes closer to the evaluative position of the fact (*pluralism*). Of course, the debate among theorists about the descriptive aspect of pluralism is reasonably less incendiary than what they discuss about the normative pluralism. This paper deals with the normative dimension of pluralism and focuses itself on the issues that have been discussed extensively and intensively by theologians in the Christian tradition.

Discussions among Christian theologians almost always employ the standard tripolar typology originated by Alan Race (1983).^[5] The typology distinguishes three attitudes among Christians toward other religions:^[2] *exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism*. In the Christian context, the *exclusivist* is one who believes that the ultimately saving truth can only be found in and through Jesus Christ, while the other religions cannot provide valid ways to salvation. Someone is an *inclusivist* if she believes that Jesus Christ is the normative savior,

although people from other religious traditions could also be saved by Jesus Christ through their own religious traditions. In other words, other religious paths are considered valid insofar as they are fulfilled by Christ's saving work. The *pluralist* is one who believes that each religious tradition is an equally valid, effective, and final vehicle of salvation.

It must be clear from the beginning that exclusivism and inclusivism have been the primary competing positions since the birth of Christianity. Both argue that Jesus Christ is the only constitutive way of salvation (Christocentrism), although each ends up with a very different conclusion. In exclusivism non-Christians are *excluded* from the circle of salvation, whereas inclusivism is willing to *include* them by virtue of Christ's salvific work. While exclusivism and inclusivism serve as counterparts to each other, the entrance of pluralism into the discourse seems anomalous, at least theoretically.

In this classical typology, pluralism is a normative position held by those who believe that different religious claims are merely perspectives on the single reality or truth. ^[26] By using the Kantian-like distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal, the proponents of pluralism argue that the divine (*noumenon*) is experienced through diverse phenomenal responses. The attitude seems to be successful in unifying all religious differences under the single ultimate canopy, and that is exactly where I find it difficult to agree with the basic idea of the pluralist position.

By re-centering the category for dealing with diverse religions to God or the Ultimate or the Real (theocentrism), the pluralists believe that all salvific mediations proclaimed by diverse religious traditions are valid ways to the single ultimate truth or God. The problem is, while none of the phenomenal responses or claims can be adequate and true in itself,

what is believed as the ultimate Truth is only vaguely comprehended by any of those religious traditions in and of themselves. For example, Christians never express faith in God by addressing the Lord's Prayer to "the Ultimate who is/are in heaven." Thus, the names of the divine in all religious communities fall away and the single divine being of the pluralists becomes abstract, detached from concrete religious experiences that have long been nurtured by the various traditions. We therefore have to ask to the pluralists: Whose truth? Which ultimacy?

Pluralism is therefore anomalous for two reasons. First, its willingness to include all religious mediations (Jesus, Buddha, etc.) into a more theocentric approach has made pluralism come closer to inclusivism. Secondly, however, in contrast with the popular view, pluralism turns to be another form of exclusivism in the end. By promoting a neutral god above all particular divine names and relativizing all those names, the pluralists seem to say that all those names are partially true (meaning: partially untrue as well). All religions can be true insofar as their particularities point to the ultimate reality preached by the pluralists.

In response to pluralism, it is necessary for me to lift up perspectives from two of its critics. First, Gavin D'Costa provides a very harsh criticism of pluralism by arguing that the non-specific-tradition approach the pluralists are trying to hold turns out, in fact, to itself be a particular tradition-specific approach. "Despite their intention to encourage openness, tolerance, and equality," D'Costa maintains, "they fail to attain these goals ... because of the tradition-specific nature of their positions. Their particular shaping tradition is the Enlightenment" (D'Costa 2000, 2). Thus, the principle of neutrality that pluralists hold is basically a myth, while the failure to avoid their own tradition-specific standpoint makes it

clear that pluralists' gods are modern gods: Unitarian, deistic, or agnostic. Consequently, D'Costa continues, it is undeniable that pluralism is in fact exclusivism and its proponents fail to fulfill their own goal, which is to promote better interreligious dialogue.

A similar criticism is offered by S.^[4] Mark Heim, who maintains that the most serious failure of pluralistic theologies is to be found in the way their *status* as theories of religion are positioned among other alternatives:¹ Heim maintains that in the final analysis they fall short of the principles they try to defend and end up with what they want to reject:

inclusivism, if not exclusivism. The reason for this is because they are unable to resolve the paradox within their central principles. While acknowledging the possibility for many faiths provide salvation through different paths, the pluralists insist that it is possible only within a conceptual framework they have already constructed. Those who do not agree with the pluralists' plan are in need of enlightenment and fulfillment. In other words, the acceptance of religious diversity by the pluralists is not as radical as they claim it to be. Religions are not accepted as they are, on their own terms, but as already framed within the conceptual understanding of the pluralists. In this sense, Heim's identification of the "inclusivist posture" of pluralistic theologies is inescapably correct.

Even more, the pluralists' insistence on using a particular framework beyond all particular traditions implies an exclusivist attitude, in which those who do not agree with such a framework are in need of being converted into their "structure of plausibility"^[34] (Heim

¹ Heim believes that the unmasking of the *status* of pluralistic theories of religion is the first and most important task in attaining a more adequate view of religious diversity (Heim 1995, 124, 131).

1995, 103). In so doing, the pluralists fall into what Heim calls “exclusivism in the mirror” (Heim 1995, 101).

The conceptual frameworks predominant in pluralistic theologies are thus ambiguous. On the one hand, by focusing on an idea of the Ultimate Reality, the pluralists attempt to acknowledge as many ways of salvation as possible. On the other hand, these frameworks are so remote and abstract that they are positioned above or beyond any particular idea of salvation provided by religions. In short, they function as meta-theologies pretending to provide the “God's-eye view”^[4] of all religious traditions.^[6]

Heim presents a harsh criticism of this kind of meta-theology (Heim 1995, 104-107).^[6] He argues that the pluralistic meta-theology fails because pluralists do not admit the fact that their approach works from within a particular tradition or a “framework of commitment.” On the contrary, they tend to mask this tradition-based position by offering selected universal principles, applying them to all traditions, and using them to view religions “on a different level and in some qualitative way beyond such particularity” (Heim 1995, 105). What is exactly the tradition on which the pluralists base their theories? Heim shows that the pluralistic meta-theology expresses “cultural structures of plausibility against which modern Western Christianity has been defined” (Heim 1995, 103). It therefore is not universal at all; rather, it is a universalizing of a particular tradition to be imposed on others. In this sense, as Heim strongly argues, “the old lamented triumphalist attitudes of Christians remain in vigorous health, if in different forms” (Heim 1995, 109).^[26]

Gavin D'Costa and S. Mark Heim are two among many theologians who reveal fundamental predicaments to religious pluralism as a normative theory. Moreover, I would

argue that the problem of pluralism as an anomaly within the classical typology has unavoidably led scholars to question the validity of the typology itself.^[5] Perry Schmidt-Leukel has done a very good job surveying the various criticisms and mapping them into eight major categories.

1.^[1] The typology has an inconsistent structure, because the positions are not of the same genre and do not address the same question.” 2.^[1] The typology is misleading, because it obscures or misses the real issues of a theology of religions. 3.^[1] The typology is too narrow. There are more than three options ... 4.^[1] The typology is too broad. There are not really three options but only one ... 5.^[1] The typology is too coarse or abstract. It does not do justice to the more complex and nuanced reality of real theologies ... 6.^[1] The typology is misleading, because it does not do justice to the radical diversity of the religions ... 7.^[1] The typology is offensive. 8.^[1] The typology is pointless, because we are not in a position to choose any of these options and therefore have to refrain from all of them. (Schmidt-Leukel 2005, 14-18)

In the Indonesian context, both in inter-religious and inter-ecclesial settings, the widespread use of the pluralist typology is evident.^[29] I have to note that, on the one hand, the seventh criticism provided by Schmidt-Leukel seems most problematic in creating heated accusations towards others who reflect different perspectives.^[29] On the other hand, those who employ the typology are also trapped into thinking that there is no other possible way to reflect upon the reality of religious diversity apart from the tripolar typology.

To sum up, firstly, we have seen the fundamental problems of the pluralist theologies of religions.^[26] As Gavin D'Costa and S. Mark Heim have argued, the promise of the pluralists to promote better interreligious dialogue that respects the otherness of others has failed, precisely because they attempt to unify all differences under a single umbrella of “the Ultimate”. Therefore, pluralism has ambiguously developed either an inclusivist tendency to keep all religious traditions under its noumenal center or an exclusivist inclination to hold its superiority as the only meta-theory against all other theories.

Secondly, we can also conclude that the usual process of discourse for theology of religions using the classical tripolar typology has been proven insufficient. This leads us to a point where we must look for new languages to take us into more fruitful interreligious encounters.^[35]▶

Transcending Pluralism

In order for us to find new languages that deal with the fact of religious diversity, we must emphasize the importance of the tradition-specific point of view. As Gavin D'Costa has already maintained, when criticizing the myth of neutrality of pluralist theologies, one has to realize that any reflection toward religious diversity must be tradition-specific. There is no God's-eye view or helicopter perspective through which one can have a neutral or objective perspective over all religious traditions. S. Mark Heim joins D'Costa's argument by maintaining that there is no meta-theory transcending all particular traditions that is free from critical evaluation.

Such perspectivism, I would argue, both enables and limits the expression of one's position from one's own religious tradition.^[7]▶ It does not mean, however, that it is impossible for one to construct her or his universal truth-claims.^[36]▶ On the contrary, we must express our understanding of the whole reality, of universal truth, from our own religious standpoint or perspective, but at the same time we must also realize that whatever we say is always non-absolute, precisely because it is a specific-tradition claim.

In this context, it would be valuable to heed what Raimundo Panikkar says about his version of perspectivism, through which he argues that there are radically different

perspectives on reality. To explain this notion, Panikkar uses the windows metaphor. It will be helpful to quote what he says at length,

We should ... be aware that we see the *totum per partem*, the whole through a part. We will have to concede that the other, the non-Christian, for instance, may have a similar experience and that the non-Christian will have to say that the Christian takes the *pars pro toto*, for from the outside one only sees the *pars*, not the *totum*—the window, not the panorama. How to combine these apparently contradictory statements? We will have to say that the other is right in discovering that we take the *pars pro toto* (because the outsider sees the window), but that we are also right in seeing the *totum per partem* (because we see the panorama). It is a *totum* for us, but *per partem*, limited to our vision through the one window. We see the *totum*, but not *totaliter* one may say (because we do not see through other windows).^[7] We see all that we can see. The other may see equally the *totum* through another window, and thus describe it differently, but both see the *totum*, although not *in toto*, but *per partem*. (Panikkar 1995, 171-172)

In another work, Panikkar explains his position in relation to his rejection of the universal theory of reality. After depicting the principles of perspectivism through the windows metaphor, he says,

This means that we do not need a universal theory as if we could enjoy a global perspective—which is a contradiction in terms. It means that each one of us may be aware of the whole under one particular aspect—and not just that we see only a part of it. Both the subjective and objective models break down.^[6] There is neither subjective nor objective universality. We see all that we can see—one may grant—but only all that we can see, our *totum*. The whole is what is wholesome for us ... Something is complete when it has an inner harmony—as we shall still emphasize. (Panikkar 1996, 140)

Panikkar's rejection of any universal theory, thus, distinguishes him from other pluralists, who assume that there should be an overarching theory that is universal enough to include any particularity. In the letter to the editor of *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Panikkar continues his “distancing” attempt from the other pluralists by saying, “The pluralism I defend is in no way a negation of the centrality of Christ when we speak Christian language, or when we think or write about the Christian economy of salvation” (Panikkar 1989, 80). The clause “when we speak Christian language” precisely refers to the

perspectivist position that he holds. Again, he argues for his perspectivist point of view, “Now, the context in which the Christian text is meaningful—and for a Christian, true—is not a universal context. Only within one particular context can Christian affirmations make sense, and be believed or disbelieved” (Panikkar 1989, 80).

Thus, if Panikkar is correct, we now have a more plausible version of pluralism—only if we still want to keep using the term—that is, a version that we may call “perspectival pluralism.”² In such an approach, there is no neutral or objective understanding of all religious traditions under an absolute truth.^[26] Consequently, a Christian or a Buddhist can make a universal truth-claim from his or her religious perspective without disrespecting truth claims other than his or her own. In Heim's words, “It is appropriate then for each to argue for and from its own universal view, so long as the diversity and actuality of religious ends are recognized” (Heim 1995, 215). Within such a universal framework, Christians will argue that the Christian ultimacy is truly attainable for Christians, while “ultimacies” claimed by other religions remain penultimate to the Christian Ultimate. Nevertheless, the distinction between ultimate and penultimate is valid only from the side of that which claims its end as ultimate. Those from other traditions could and should claim their religious ultimacies—penultimate in the Christian framework—as ultimate in their own framework,

² Perspectival pluralism as demonstrated in Panikkar's theology to some extent is similar to what Nicholas Rescher calls orientational pluralism, that is, “a position that maintains that philosophical positions hinge on diverse views regarding matters of cognitive-value, so that philosophical disagreement becomes inevitable” (Rescher 1985, 125). In my previous work (Adiprasetya 2009), I attempt to combine Rescher's static characteristic of orientational pluralism with the more dynamic idea of transversal rationality from Calvin Schrag (Schrag 1992), especially by using the classical idea of perichoresis to deal with the issue of religious plurality.

while acknowledging the Christian ultimacy as penultimate to them. It is within such a universal yet perspectival framework that we will hold a healthier respect for non-Christian believers and, at the same time, transcend the absolutist or “identist” version of pluralism³.

How can this approach be workable?^[6] To answer this question it is important to note that any theory or theology regarding religious diversity must simultaneously fulfill at least two fundamental principles. First, it must maintain *commitment* to one's particular beliefs. Second, it must maintain *openness* toward other religious traditions on their own terms, that is, the auto-description of each tradition by its adherents. Such dialectic does not need to be resolved by choosing one over the other. While the commitment to the Christian faith enables us to hold to the Christian perspective of Christian truth-claims, for example, the openness to other religions allows us to respect religious Others on their own terms. In the next section, I propose the idea of interreligious friendship and hospitality as an example of how Christians can creatively and constructively maintain the dialectic .

Celebrating Interreligious Friendship

Friendship is a term found in both Christian and non-Christian worlds. It is particularly Christian insofar as it is placed within the larger structure of the virtuous life as defined by a Christian. However, we might find the similar notion of friendship in other religious traditions, whether it is recognized as a virtue or not. The question as to whether

³ The term “identist pluralism” is coined by David Ray Griffin in contrast to what he calls “deep pluralism” (Griffin 2005).

friendship is a universal virtue has been addressed by James L. Fredericks^[47], employing the idea of interreligious friendship from the perspective of comparative theology^[2]. In answering the question, he argues,

In the recent literature on the virtues, there is widespread agreement that at least some virtues are universal.^[2] At the same time, however, there is also widespread agreement that all virtues are intimately connected with particular cultural contexts.^[2] Here, I have refrained from claiming that interreligious friendship should be recognized as a virtue within non-Christian religious traditions, even as I have noted that all friendships, including friendships that run across religious traditions, entail reciprocated love.^[2] Although I enjoy the friendship of several Buddhists, Buddhism as such may not think of interreligious friendships as virtuous. (Fredericks 1998, 173)

As a challenger of pluralist theologies and as well as of theologies of religions that use the classical tripolar typology, Fredericks realizes the danger of generalizing a certain concept—including friendship—from within a particular religious tradition, since the exact meaning of that concept should be located in the “particular cultural contexts” of the tradition. At the same time, Fredericks believes that all variants in the tripolar typology, especially pluralism, do not help empower Christians^[42] “to develop skills for living responsibly and creatively with non-Christian believers” and “to engage their non-Christian neighbors creatively” (Fredericks 1999, 163, 165). Instead of starting with theorization of other religions, as demonstrated in theologies of religions, Fredericks maintains rather that Christians need an alternative that starts from^[5] “studying other religions on their own terms and then exploring their own Christian faith using what they have learned about other religions” (Fredericks 1999, 168). The alternative is now widely called comparative theology.^[34]

The idea of interreligious friendship is of great importance for those working in the field of comparative theology since it becomes a fruitful medium for Christians and non-Christians to engage with each other creatively. “[T]he friend’s religion becomes a living

reality, no longer confined to the pages of the book, an embodied truth, not an abstract doctrine. Christianity exists not in books but rather in the actual lives of Christian believers.^[4] "The same is true of all religions" (Fredericks 1999, 176).

For Christians, the biblical and theological bases for interreligious friendship are plenty. The surprising statement from Jesus to reverse and replace the social "sacred order" (*hierarchy*—*hieros* + *arche*) with the "servant order" (*doularchy*—*doulos* + *arche*) is only half-way, since the ideal social relation that Jesus dreams of is rather the "friend order" (*philiarchy*—*philia* + *arche*). Not only does Jesus say, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.^[8] But it is not so among you;^[8] but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mar. 10:42-44, NRSV), but he also expresses his passion, "I do not call you servants any longer ... but I have called you friends" (Joh. 15:15, NRSV). The friendship marked with equality is thus what Jesus imagines for any authentic human relation.

In the Christian tradition, friendship-love or preferential love (*philia*) has often been eclipsed by the primacy of *agape* or unconditional love (Fredericks 1998, 163). In response to this shortcoming, James L. Fredericks joins other theologians in recovering the value of *philia*, especially in the context of interfaith encounter. He argues that doing theology comparatively should be based on *philia*, which respects "the innate attractiveness of [non-Christian friends'] actual beliefs and religious practices"^[28] (Fredericks 1999, 175). He continues, "Christians should hold non-Christians in friendship based on a preferential love,

a love that treasures the non-Christian not because of Jesus' command to love, but because of the innate goodness and virtue of the friend" (Fredericks 1999, 175).

Another way of transcending pluralism and fostering interreligious friendship has been made by others through the more specific form of *philia*, that is, the idea of hospitality. Just like friendship (*philia*), hospitality is biblical in character. In the Christian scriptures, hospitality is etymologically rooted in the word *philoxenia* (*philia* + *xenos*: befriending strangers). It appears at least twice in the Christian scriptures (Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2), although the basic concept of hospitality is predominant in Christian scriptures. The idea helps Christians to interpret human hospitality in light of divine hospitality—for instance, the story of divine visitation to Abraham and Sarah, or Jesus Christ's incarnation as God's hospitality toward the whole creation.

Amos Yong's work, *Hospitality and the Other* (2008), importantly contributes the idea and practice of hospitality as a better way to encounter the religious Others after the impasse of pluralist theologies.⁴ Yong argues that the strength of interreligious hospitality is rooted in Trinitarian hospitality toward a diverse world, in which God becomes both Guest and Host through Jesus Christ and the Spirit.^[4]

To be sure, the idea and practice of hospitality can also be found in other religious traditions (Béthune 2007; Dreuille 2000, 312-330). By comparing similar traditions of hospitality in several religions, for example, Béthune comes to the conclusion that most traditions identify the act of welcoming strangers with the act of welcoming the divine. I

⁴ For the discussion of hospitality in the context of interreligious encounter, see (Béthune 2010; Moyaert 2011).^[6]

believe the similarity needs to be seen as a vague one, so that we do not tempt ourselves to understand hospitality as one more “common essence” in all religious traditions, as often demonstrated by the pluralists, that is implied before the actual encounters between religious followers happen. This is what significantly distinguishes my perspectival approach with that of pluralist theologies, which assume such “common essences” even before they meet their non-Christians “friends.”

Hospitality as befriending strangers begins with recognition that religious Others cannot be framed or subsumed within our preferred categories. They always appear before us as total strangers, inviting us to respect them as they are and seeing imaginatively in them the God of Jesus Christ. The fluid exchange of divine roles as Guest and Host, in Jesus' and the Spirit's hospitable relations with the diverse world, inspires Christians to be willing to open up their lives by being both hosts and guests for their non-Christian neighbors. It is indeed a risky commitment, especially if we live in a religiously violent environment.⁵ The risks include the possibility of silent strangers (*xenoi*) turning to be violent ones (*barbaroi*), or friends becoming enemies. Yet, risk always involves hope and surprise. Hospitality can also change strangers to be loving guests and transform enemies to friends.

Here, I do not want to say that Christians should undertake interreligious friendship and hospitality in order to change and transform the religious Others.^[25] On the contrary, it is the Christians who should transform their own lives without forcing others to do the same.

⁵ For an excellent work on the importance of risky hospitality in the aftermath of religious communal violence in Indonesia, see Septemmy E. Lakawa's dissertation (2011).

Such an imperative can only and simply offer an invitation for the religious Others to trust and welcome their Christian neighbors.

To conclude, the necessity to discard pluralist theologies and reconstruct post-pluralistic theologies based on interreligious friendship and hospitality is evident in our contemporary contexts. In some ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia, where the state haphazardly involves itself in people's religious lives, using pluralism as an ideological tool is ineffective for dealing with religiously diverse societies. Also, the offensive nature of the classical typology can only worsen interfaith relations among the Indonesian people. Such a problematic approach has been apparent in many Indonesian governmental projects of “dialogue and tolerance,” designed especially for religious leaders. They have not been found effectively workable among people at the grassroots.

A better solution is interreligious friendship and hospitality undertaken by common people with their neighbors, since their actions transcend the shortcomings of abstract theorization and verbal dialogues about religious pluralism. In contrast with pluralist theologies or ideologies, interreligious hospitality delves deeper into more existential encounters among the people. It creates an invitation for people from different religious traditions to open up their “houses of being,” welcome others as respected guests, embrace their neighbors as beloved friends, and construct new public spaces that have thus far been damaged by religious violence.^[25] Such a process of “undomesticating hospitality” (Lakawa 2011, 415) enables people from all religious traditions to carry out missional dialogue and dialogical mission in new public spaces with equal respect for others.

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