

Foreword

From the frying pan of the ‘Narrow-Minded, Dry, Holy Ones’ “*tang nazari khoshk muqaddasan*” into the fire of Hick’s Religious Pluralism

Some years ago, in Brampton Canada, my Muharram majlis provoked the question: *Where will Mother Teresa go – Heaven or Hell?* This was in reaction to my submission challenging the notion of religious pluralism, which seemed to have found favour amongst members of the congregation, who as a result of their intellectual discussions within academia, appeared to have concluded that ‘all roads lead to Rome’.

My deliberations with a number of such academic members of our community revealed their unawareness that the original concept of religious pluralism was a subtle defence to the doctrine of salvation through Christ.

Thereby, providing in Christianity, toleration for other religions. Essentially, the roots of religious pluralism lie in the development of political liberalism in eighteenth century Europe, which was reeling from the horrible tales of religious persecution.

The Enlightened European thinkers of the time were reacting to religious intolerance, which had resulted in the history of sectarian wars to be avoided by all means.

Having witnessed the consequences of religious intolerance, the eighteenth century European Christians were anxious to recover through an ideology that was entrenched in religious principles and thereby securing its permanent effect of ensuring peace and progress in Europe both politically and philosophically – whilst preserving the sanctity of Christianity.

The principal advocate, Professor John Hick, devised the convoluted concept of religious pluralism by incorporating the Christian doctrine of salvation, allowing almost anyone to enter heaven.

Ironically, to make his case, Hick used amongst other arguments Rāmānujā’s fable of the blind men describing an elephant. Thus suggesting that in our visualization of the ultimate reality, we are in the position of the blind men describing the elephant.

Our ultimate reality is limited by the structures of the various religions. In other words, be it through the trunk, or the leg or the ear, it was sufficient to conceptualize the elephant.

While Rāmānujā used the parable to demonstrate our limitations in knowing the ultimate reality, Hick expounded religious pluralism by suggesting that the world's numerous faiths had reconcilable differences in striving for the ultimate reality.

It is indeed a sorry state of affairs that when we are blessed with far more profound answers to the issues of rigid exclusivity, that Muslim intellectuals should be impressed by Hick's weak defence supported only by marginalised Christian thinkers.

This timely translation of the Persian essay on *Islam and Religious Pluralism* by ʿAyatullāh Shahʿd Muḥahharʿ is a much needed contribution to further this debate, so as to enable us to better understand the Islāmic perspective on religious pluralism.

This work is yet another example of this deceased scholar's ingenious foresight, for decades ago, he undertook to address the topical questions that vex Muslim youths exposed to Western academia today.

This book offers rational answers to questions such as: will the great inventors and scientists, despite their worthy services for humanity, go to Hell? Will the likes of Pasteur and Edison go to Hell whilst indolent people who have spent their lives in a corner of the Masjid go to Heaven? Has God created Heaven solely for the Sh`as?

In contrast to Hick's compromising view, Sh` scholars generally agree that God's damnation does not arbitrarily apply to all who lack faith in His revelations. For instance, exceptions are made for those who are incapable (*qāsir*) such as children and adults who are intellectually impaired.

The scholars of the school of Ahlul Baʿt (as) make a distinction between the *incapable* (*qāsir*) and the *negligent* (*muqassir*) who have misplaced convictions despite having access to Islām. Shahʿd Muḥahharʿ' s enquiry into the problem of religious pluralism elaborates the distinction of these two categories.

What is interesting however, is that he defines the category of the *incapable* to include those for whom Islām has not been accessible. For instance, a remote residence where Islām has not been propagated or those living in an Islāmaphobic environment which has resulted in ill-founded misconceptions.

Shahʿd Muḥahharʿ' s brilliant rationale of the incapable (*qāsir*) establishes that heaven has not been reserved for a minority within a minority.

Thus, boldly answering the dogmatism actively promoted by those he has identified as "narrow minded dry holy ones" (*tang nazari khushk muqaddasan*). The impact of such dogmatism is manifested in many superstitions of the Sh` masses.

To illustrate, I can do no better than to quote one such example by ﷺ:

“Will (we) make a will that a large sum out of the money that we have acquired through wrong means or that we should have spent in our lifetime in good causes – but didn’t – should be given to the caretakers of one of the holy shrines in order for us to be buried near the graves of God’s saints, so that the Angels don’t dare punish us.” Such people should know that they have been blinded and the curtain of negligence has covered their eyes.”

I conclude that to seek other means to satisfy intellect curiosities on this discussion inevitably results in falling from the frying pan of the *tang nazari khoshk muqaddasan* into the fire of Religious Pluralism.

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