A Short History of Religious Pluralism and Tolerance

Yonas Tesema Amaya
Department of History and Heritage Management, Dire Dawa University, Ethiopia, P.O. Box 1362

Abstract
Since recent years, the world has seen sharp rises of religious extremism and radicalization. The space for religious pluralism and tolerance seems deteriorating. However, people from different corners of the world have been tolerating each other in terms of religious practices. Different religious followers have been living together without confronting each other. The movement for religious tolerance and pluralism was incepted during the 16th century and religious toleration edicts were declared. This article tries to shed some lights on a brief history of religious tolerance and pluralism.

Keywords: religious pluralism, religious tolerance, edicts

The Conceptual and Theoretical Approaches of Religious Pluralism and Religious Tolerance

Pluralism and tolerance are strongly related concepts. The intertwine relation between the two terms requires understanding of both for implementation and factual practices. Therefore, in this section I will discuss the conceptual and theoretical approaches of the two terms.

To begin with, etymologically, the term pluralism came from the Latin word pluralis- meaning more than one—a logical thought which asserts that “reality consists of various foundations which separate from each other; that reality consist of various elementary aspect of different nature”.

According to theological account, the term indicates agreement, union, and compatibility across different beliefs and religious tradition. The sociological reference of religious pluralism is more of descriptive in nature. Consequently, in sociology, religious pluralism refers to the multiplicity of various religious traditions within similar cultural area. It also accounts for the pattern of peaceful co-existence among various religious actors, individuals, societies and the state around culture, social, economic and political agendas (Bachoff 2008).

Religious philosophers assert that various known world religious beliefs and practices are inherently equal in creating alternative access to get into Ultimate Reality. To put in other words no religion is superior or inferior to other; all religions are basically equal in so long as they all are good ways to realize the authentic truth. Such kind of argument is parallel to the saying “Light is the same lamps are many; the truth is one but the wise people describe it in different way”. Thus, no particular religion has right to claim as it is an exclusive path to the truth.

Understanding religious pluralism in such way enables us to treat other religion with intimacy and open mindedness than distancing and leveling them under bad moral condition (Mohanta 2010:154; Rowe 1999; see also Hick 1984). Likewise, for Stark et al religious pluralism is the intrinsic condition of the society. He states that “religious pluralism is the natural religious condition of the societies” (1995: 432).

Netland (2001) analyzed the concept of religious pluralism from two dimensions. Accordingly he classified religious pluralism in to descriptive and normative types. The descriptive religious pluralism accounts for the state of affair that exist in human communities made up of people have different religions, beliefs, backgrounds and ways of expressing their conviction. On the other hand, the normative religious pluralism concerned with more than the description of diverse human feature in a situation in which much of the human race now lives. In normative religious pluralism, diverse religious traditions are recognized and protected by social practice and by legal forms. In normative religious pluralism, the diverse beliefs and practices are held to be positive force in social life giving moral and spiritual depth to civic discourse enriching personal and family life, and even making the diverse religious communities themselves better representation of their faith.

According to Griffin (2005) acceptance and factual practice of religious pluralism requires one to know negative and positive assertions. The negative assertion is the denial of absolute claim of earlier religion or the denunciation of priori supposition that their own religion is the solitary path that offers saving truths and value to its believer, that it alone is divinely inspired, that it has been divinely established as the only legitimate religion instead to replace all other. The positive assertion is the recognition of the idea that there are certainly religious
others than one’s own that provide saving truths and values to their adherents. If the adherents of that tradition do believe they have such truths and values, they assume that other religious do as well.

Generally, pluralism can be made possible through examining the common phrase that “we agree to disagree” says Daninark (1984:111). That is to say in pluralistic society though we do not believe in the doctrine and practices of other religion; we have to agree to reckon other’s religion is inherently equal to ours at least in philosophical level.

Before concluding this section let us see four different approaches of explanations suggested by various scholars for existence of religious pluralism. The first one is the assumption that the diverse world beliefs and religious traditions are emerged as result of responsiveness of the reality as experienced. According to this assumption the premise is that the various religious traditions are established by being there of Divine Reality. The Divine Reality came to conscious of human mind via various sets of religious concepts and configuration of religious implication that function in different religious tradition of the world (Hick 1984).

The second but parallel to the first explanation is the concept of “Cultural Filter Explanation”. In view of this thought, “the Ultimate Reality reveals itself to people as it is”, however, the social and cultural context influence the Reality to be understood in fundamentally different way. Here the assumption is that culture dictates the understanding of Reality. Thus, the diverse religions in the world are due to different cultural contexts².

The third suggestion for existence of various world religions is “the perversity explanation.” According to this assumption there is unwavering path that Reality can be understood, but human corruption put off beliefs about Reality. This thought, of course, gives theoretical room for various religious believers to assert that they have right of entry to Divine Reality while others do not. It is to mean that experiencing Reality is based on righteous and virtuous moral Conduct³.

The last justification is the “information privileged explanation” approach. According to this perspective there is determinant way that reality reveals itself to all people, through experience, nature, or morality. Nevertheless, some people have been given more information about reality perhaps through revelation than other⁴. All justification ensures that ultimate Reality is but different social and cultural aspect determines the existence of various world traditions.

The other point of discussion is tolerance. The root meaning of tolerance is derived from the Latin word tolerare- “meaning to bear or endure; it connotes putting up with a weight or burden.”⁵ From religious perspectives, while defining tolerance, Alxinger says, “we all are seekers –since no person or institution possess absolute truth, tolerance means open-mindedness, willingness to learn the truth from other”. It accounts for the cultured character to conquer our self-natural leaning to remote, repudiate or harass others whose religious traditions are different from ours own( 1969: 69).

Similarly, in diversified societies where multiplicity of beliefs and religious traditions occur, tolerance can be seen as a precondition for accommodation of such human character. The factual practice of tolerance can be archived by creating free space for other beliefs, accepting and appreciating their philosophy, distancing oneself from persecuting other and implementing their Religion⁶. Equally, Grell and Porter argue that the foundational for religious tolerance depend on heterogeneity of world religious. The various religious traditions of the world convict everyone that there are many ways to ultimate reality. Therefore, they write:

- The globe presented a cabinet of diverse faiths –Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, with all their sects and schisms, to say nothing of polytheistic cults.
- Confrontations with such radical heterogeneity fostered the deistic conviction that there are many ways to God, discoverable through nature, each acceptable to the Supreme Being, and hence deserving of tolerance (2000: 4)

Generally tolerance is an essential element of moral virtue. It inherently related with the intrinsic value of human being. From the point of religiosity, it is requirement for peaceful and harmonious co-existence where there are diverse religious practices.

**History of Religious Tolerance and Pluralism**

The history of religious tolerance and pluralism can be traced many centuries back albeit not official as such. In some countries of the world, many religions were practiced without confronting each other even before AD. However, the struggle for religious toleration was started in the 16th century than ever before. Prior to that, some religious edicts were proclaimed though they didn’t bring expected tolerance as well. For instance, Edict of Milan was declared in 313 AD by Holy Roman Emperor of the time Constantine I to bring religious freedom for all in the empire⁷. Moreover, in the 16th century, European countries like Hungary and France contributed a lot for the wider acceptance of religious toleration and pluralism because of their home-grown religious wars. Let us see some well known most important events which contributed for religious toleration and pluralism since 16th century here below.
Union of Utrecht (1579)
This union proved that every person has to follow his/her own religion without any interference. It granted rights to every individual to choose what religion he/she preferred and that no one should be persecuted because of his/her religion or belief (Van der Wall 2000: 117).

Edict of Nantes (1598)
The then the king of France, Henry IV, declared Edict of Nantes in 1598. France was devastated by religious wars from 1562-1590. By this Edict, the Huguenots had granted somewhat religious freedom. The Revocation of the Edict was held in 1685 which further realized other minority religions. The major aim of the Edict was to resolve prolonged religious wars than for toleration.

Nevertheless, the Edict contributed a step forward the idea about toleration among denominations (Lecler 1960: 147; Linton 2000: 157).

Protestant Reformation
Protestant Reformation was started by 1517 when Luther began to challenge religious policies of Catholics and stood against the sale of indulgency. Throughout the 16th century and first half of 17th century, Europe wasragged apart by religious wars. These religious disagreement and belligerency led Europeans to seek for solution. To substantiate this idea, Lecler elucidated:

The 16th century controversies, then, provoked a great variety of opinions, from the complete refusal of tolerance to the most radical demands for freedom. This appearance of radical ideas, from the very beginning, is even one of the most characteristic consequences of the Reformation (Lecler 1960: 495).

In early modern centuries, many people were being aware of religious tolerance and asking for the end of tyranny government and persecution of faith (Grell& Porter 2000: 2). Moreover, the 16th century Europe was a turning point for religious toleration and conscience. It was a period when:-

- Many scholars were asking for the separation of state and church
- Religious tolerance somewhat granted by states
- The some states forbade forcible conversion of religion (Lecler 1960)

Enlightenment Movement
The Enlightenment movement of 17th and 18th centuries played its part for religious freedom and toleration. The Enlightenment thinkers were influential in proposing the idea of tolerance and moderation in religion. The Enlightenment movement can be considered as the cornerstone in the emanating the idea of tolerance by which people’s ways of thinking and behaving changed. It was a period when government tried to grant toleration to differing religions and to make society aware of tolerance (Fitzpatrick 2000: 26). It was the period when people realized that religious toleration can bring religious harmony than discrimination. “Enlightenment had the greatest opportunities …for campaigning for wider toleration” (ibid: 30).

Furthermore, regarding the contributions of Enlightenment thinkers to religious toleration, Tomaselli (2000: 86) described:

Voltaire and Rousseau had led their readers to endorse religious toleration, or see that a true social contract would endorse it, by dint of disputation which did not rest on the goodness of acts of toleration or the facts that tolerance is morally edifying, an enhancement of one’s moral character or persona.

Therefore, the Enlightenment movement which opposed church abuse and challenged the government to incorporate religious toleration was also arguing for the religious secularism by opposing state interference of the church.

Recently, the UN did several things to promote religious freedom and toleration. For instance, freedom of belief was endorsed in 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Moreover, in 1981, UN General Assembly proclaimed the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. To sum up, through all these ups and downs, the concept of religious tolerance and pluralism become gaining acceptance among many states and denominations since it is too difficult for a given state if not accepted where variety of religion existed.

Religious Tolerance and Pluralism in Ethiopia
If we take Ethiopia as an example of religious tolerance and pluralism, Ethiopia is the home of diversified people in history, culture, tradition and religion. All religions in Ethiopia except few were diffused to us from abroad. However, the peaceful co-existence and cohabitation of religion is more or less accepted on the ground. Historically, the then Christian Ethiopia warmly hosted the Muslim in 7th century AD peacefully and the Muslims were given a place of practicing their faith. This good relation between Christianity and Islam was not
continued mainly since 13th century to 17th century.

The peaceful co-existence between Orthodox and Islam was sometimes on and off. Until the ousting of emperor Hailesilase from the power, the Orthodox religion was recognized as official religion of the state and the regime ignored other denominations. The constitution of the time itself realized that a one who is going to be appointed as a country’s ruler must be from Orthodox background. It was during the time of the Derg when Islam and other religious sects were given somewhat opportunity to propagate and preach their religion. It was for the first time when Muslim population began to observe religious holidays and Orthodox lost its hegemony off being state religion under the Derg regime (Ahmed 2006: 8).

In the FDRE constitution, the equality and freedom of all religion is endorsed. The constitution is different from its predecessors by granting more religious rights albeit not applied on the ground. What the government officials saying about the religious tolerance and pluralism are quite different from what is seeing on the ground. As Dereje pointed out, there is no religious tolerance and pluralism (machachal) in Ethiopia than tolerating (machahal) the forbearance of the Christian hegemony. Moreover, the government is using the name of religious tolerance and pluralism as a podium to deceive the people.

Notes
3. Ibid
4. Ibid

References