

If one faith is true, does this mean all others are false?

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When I encountered people from other faiths, particularly Christians, I realised that being an insider, more often than not, ambiguates one's picture of the universe of faiths. Thus, I decided to embark on a journey of re-discovering other faiths, Christianity in particular. Hence, doing a degree at the University of Durham, UK, was a transformative experience in the way I see not only Christianity but also other religions. At Durham, my mind opened to many theological and philosophical questions. One of these questions was the question at hand, i.e. if one

faith is true, does this mean all others are false? To me, any answer to this question only raised further questions, like: is truth embraceable? Do we have certain criteria by which truth and reality can be measured? To what extent can one distance oneself from one's own background or cultural context? Can truth be relative? Out of these questions, this essay addresses the first, i.e. if one faith is true, does this mean all others are false?

'What is truth?' is a question that needs to be addressed before dealing with the question we are concerned with here. Throughout the history of philosophical and theological inquiry, five major theories have emerged on the definition of 'truth'. First, the 'correspondence theory', which states that 'a judgement is said to be true when it conforms to the external reality'.¹ Second, the 'coherence theory', which holds that a truth-claim necessitates a proper fit of elements, factors and propositions within a whole system, each element supporting the other.² Third, the 'constructivist theory', a theory that relatives truth and looks at it as constructed by social processes, and

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as historically and culturally specific.³ Fourth, the ‘consensus theory’, which proposes that truth is whatever is agreed upon or might come to be agreed upon by a certain group.⁴ Fifth, the ‘pragmatic theory’, which concludes that truth is verified and confirmed by the results of putting one’s concepts into practice.⁵

For being the most widely believed, most long-standing,⁶ and most inter-cultural and interdisciplinary theory, this essay adopts the ‘correspondence theory’. In the field of philosophy, the renowned ancient Greek philosophers, Socrates (d. 399 BCE), Plato (d. 347 BCE) and Aristotle (d. 322 BCE), all subscribed to it. They believed that the truth or falsity of a representation is decided by how it relates to the world of ‘things’, by whether or not it precisely describes those things.⁷ Crossing the Greek philosophy and culture to Muslim philosophy and culture, in his book *Kitab al-Shifa* (the Book of Healing), Avicenna (d. 1037 CE), defined truth as: ‘what is corresponds in the mind to what is outside it’.⁸ Crossing again the Islamic philosophical and cultural borders to Christian theology, Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274 CE), says: ‘a judgement is said to be true when it conforms to the external reality’.⁹

While the five stated theories, whether implicitly or explicitly, agree on the reachability of the ultimate truth, Descartes (d. 1650 CE), goes further to question the truth’s embraceability. Descartes speaks about the embraceability of the ultimate truth in this way:

*I say that I know this, not that
I can conceive or comprehend*

it; because it is possible to know that God is infinite and all powerful although our soul, being finite, cannot comprehend or conceive Him. In the same way, we can touch a mountain with our hands but we cannot put our arms around it, as we could put them around a tree or something else not too large for them. To comprehend something is to embrace it in one’s thought; to know something is to touch it with one’s thought.¹⁰

‘We can touch a mountain with our hands but we cannot put our arms around it’, this statement is the crux of our present discussion. Two conclusions can be deduced from this Cartesian quotation. First, the transcendence of the ultimate truth. That is to say that the ultimate truth is too transcendent to be fully conceived and wholly encompassed by a certain faith. Second, the deficiency of most humans to fully grasp the ultimate truth. This is not to devalue the reason and intellect of humans, but rather to say that the minds of humans are largely shaped by their environments, upbringing, life experiences ... etc. In other words, each human being lives a life that subconsciously shapes the way he/she believes and thinks. Therefore, the more one gets rid of such influences, the more one comes closer to realizing the ultimate truth; yet reaching such a level of objectivity, in most cases, lies outside the capability of most of the humans.

Given the preceding, there are two major deficiencies that indicate the

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human being's inability to reach the entirety of truth. These deficiencies are either environmental or personal. The old allegory of the 'elephant in darkness' which had its roots in the Buddhist tradition, provides a clear demonstration of the environmental deficiency. According to Rumi's (d. 1273 CE) version of the story, a group of Hindus brings an elephant to a town at night. People of the town, impatient to wait until the morning, go to the dark room where the elephant is kept. Unable to see the animal, they can only perceive it through touching. Upon touching different parts of the elephant's body, each person describes the elephant differently. One, who has touched its ear, describes it as similar to a fan. Another, who has touched its trunk, says the elephant is like a gutter. A third man, who has touched its leg, describes the elephant as similar to a pillar. Finally, a person who has touched its back describes it as like a bed. If each of them had a candle at hand, there would be no difference in their statements.¹¹

That is the environmental/contextual deficiency. To put it more clearly, the inability to conceive the reality of the elephant is not due to an inherent disability in human mind *per se*, but due to the darkness/environment surrounding it. This darkness caused by the 'night', constitutes a thick veil preventing those approaching the elephant from the full comprehension of the truth of the elephant. The extent to which one can get rid of such veils and be freed from such constraints varies from one individual to another. Therefore, people



Blind monks examining an elephant, by Hanabusa Itchō, Wikimedia Commons

end up reaching different levels of the ultimate truth.

While Rumi's version of the story of the elephant indicates an 'environmental' deficiency, another version of the same story gives an indication of a 'personal' deficiency. This 'personal' version of the story is told by the renowned Muslim theologian Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE). While, in Rumi's version, the visitors' inadequate perception of the elephant is due to the darkness of the room at night, Al-Ghazali describes those visitors as 'physically blind'.¹² Therefore, one may conclude that, for Al-Ghazali, most human beings are incapable of grasping truth in its entirety due to personal inadequacies. But, for Rumi, this is a matter of environmental influences. Although they both differ as regards to the causes of such prevalent inability – personal in the case of Al-Ghazali and environmental in the case of Rumi – they come to the same conclusion, i.e. human beings, more often than not, are incompetent to access the perfection and fullness of the ultimate truth.



Temple of All Religions in Kazan, Russia, Wikimedia Commons

In modern philosophical theology, the conflicting truth-claims led to the emergence of different typologies to study the phenomenon of truth-claims. The most common typology that has widely been used in this area is the *Threefold Typology*, first identified by Alan Race, in his book: *Christians and Religious Pluralism*.¹³ This typology is composed of three main types: 1. *Exclusivism*, which states that only those who hear the Gospel proclaimed and explicitly confess Christ are the bearers of the truth, as they are to absorb the wholeness of reality and firmly are on the only valid path to salvation;¹⁴ *Inclusivism*, which refers to that Christ is the normative revelation of God, and the bringer of the ultimate reality, yet although reality fully exists in Christianity, it exists in other religions, but not at the same level of fullness;¹⁵ 3. *Pluralism*, which states that ‘all religions are equal and valid

paths to the one divine reality and that Christ is one revelation among many equally important revelations’.¹⁶

What is of major relevance to our essay question is the Pluralist position. Pluralism sees all religions as valid and legitimate when viewed within their own cultural background. Thus, no single religion has a monopoly on truth, but all represent varying experiences of the Ultimate Reality. The father of Pluralism, John Hick, argues that adherents of different religions approach the same God, but from various historical and cultural standpoints,¹⁷ and consequently, ‘each concrete historical divine personality – Yahweh, the heavenly Father and the Qur’anic Allah – is a joint product of the universal divine presence and a particular historically formed mode of constructive religious imagination’.¹⁸ Thus religions are all valid paths towards God. Therefore, if a

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person is born within a Muslim family, he is likely to be a Muslim, and the same applies to any other religion, since birth accidents have effectual roles to play here. With this in mind, to say that a particular religion is inferior to another, or less salvific than the other, is just a form of cultural narrow-mindedness.¹⁹ Thus, one should not then conceptualise religions as rivals, vying with each other, and we should stop making monolithic claims to truth. Lastly, if all this is accepted, we should abstain from asking that question, 'which is the true, or truest, religion?'²⁰

Hick believes that 'the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it',²¹ this divine reality is the ground on which all religious experiences take place. Therefore, Hick's thesis is based on four premises. First, there is only one divine reality, which Hick calls 'the Real'. Second, no single religion has a full and direct conception of the Real. Third, each religion represents its own way of experiencing the Real. Fourth, the Real transcends all descriptions and human imagination.²² As a consequence, Hick believes that correct belief about the Hereafter is not necessary for salvation.²³ This is not to say that there are no true answers to the disputable issues between different religions, yet to say that knowing such answers is beyond our reach.²⁴ Thus, we must not interpret the views that oppose one another literally, yet mythologically, in order to avoid falling into contradictions.²⁵

While the Hickian position *relativizes* truth-claims, the contemporary Muslim Pluralist, Seyyed Hussain Nasr, calls for *revitalizing* it. Nasr criticises Hick's Pluralism for undermining the value of 'truth' and leading to reductive Pluralism. Nasr argues that truth is not to be *relativized*, in order to resolve the problem of truth-claims; but to be *revitalized*. Adnan conceptualises Nasr's view in these words:

*Nasr, on the other hand, would argue that there is a need for rediscovery of tradition which will provide a fresh outlook on the function and usefulness of religion. Hence, the intellectual activity in this century should be directed not to those engagements which help to relativize the 'truth' of religions, such as conventional religious Pluralism, but to those, such as the perennial philosophy, which revitalizes the 'truths' of religions.*²⁶

With Hick's and Nasr's proposals, a number of comparisons can be made. First, Hick thinks that people are the major participants in the construction of faiths, so for Hick producing 'truth' lies within the capability of human beings,²⁷ whereas Nasr believes that 'truth', regardless of religious truth, is sacred, and it exclusively comes from God. Thus, God is the generator of 'truth'. So, 'What humans must do is to bow before this truth. We should not attempt to create a 'truth'. What we can do is to be a mirror of that 'truth' and reflect it as it is'.²⁸ Second, Hick's conceptualisa-

tion of religious Pluralism could work effectively in certain cultures, initially, the Western culture. Hence, it is 'more culture-specific rather than 'trans-cultural', but Nasr's Pluralism seems less culture-specific. Therein, he seems to pay considerable attention to universality, yet not in the account of locality.²⁹ Third, whereas Hick thinks that there is no sacred reality, meaning that reality circles everything including God,³⁰ Nasr believes that:

God as Ultimate Reality is not only the Supreme Person but also the source of all that is, hence at once Supra-Being and Being, God as Person and the Godhead or Infinite Essence of which Being is the first determination. Both He or She and It and yet beyond all pronominal categories, God as Ultimate Reality is the Essence which is the origin of all forms, the Substance compared with which all else is accident, the One who alone is and who stands even above the category of being as usually understood.³¹

Fourth, Hick approaches the question as a pluralist whereas Nasr approaches it as a perennialist. Although the two terms are often used interchangeably, there is a subtle difference between the two departures. Even though both agree that there is no single true religion, they differ as regards to the universal truth. That is to say that while pluralism endorses a partial understanding of the universal truth, perennialism holds that each religion provides in its own terms



To seek parts of the truth wherever it arises

a full interpretation of the universal truth.³² Fifth, although Nasr agrees with Hick in that there will be a religious transformation in the coming century, he remarkably disagrees with him regarding the features of such a transformation. While for Hick that transformation would mean that the current boundaries between the living religions will vanish,³³ for Nasr there will be a re-discovery or revitalisation of traditions, that will ensure the peaceful survival of individuals as well as societies, but the boundaries between religions will not vanish, yet each religion will preserve its own identity and maintain its particularities.³⁴ To overcome the problems occasioned by the absolute truth claims of each religion, Nasr proposes the concept of the 'relative absolute'³⁵: it is to 'make us able to understand the 'formal' differences, because they possess different possibilities in their celestial archetypes. Yet they are united in their essence, since they have stemmed from the same origin

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and speak about the same reality in different languages'.³⁶

To drive my message home, it could conceivably be hypothesised that there must be a distinction between two levels: discussing truth at a Divine level and discussing it at a human level. If we are to talk about 'truth' vis-a-vis the 'human level', then the answer to the essay question is, no; if one faith is true, all others are NOT necessarily false. If we are to talk about the Divine/Transcendent level, then the answer is yes; if one faith is true, all others are necessarily of false claims. Obviously, this differentiation between the Divine and the human has some resonance with 'the Kantian distinction between *phenomena* (the way we see things) and *noumena* (the-thing-in-itself), which is unknown to us'.³⁷

absorbing the Qur'anic truth itself is not static; it rather is dynamic, discursive and progressive

What makes it more of 'resonance' rather than full 'subscription' to the Kantian distinction, is that I believe, as a Muslim, that the Qur'an gives me access to the *noumena*; yet although the Qur'an gives such an access, I still cannot guarantee that my own interpretation of the text itself meets the fullness of what is revealed of the ultimate truth.

This conclusion is due to some prevalent deficiencies in humans that, more often than not, accompany their journey pursuing the ultimate truth. Indeed, the parable of the elephant and the blind men reveals two major deficiencies, i.e. either

peoples' 'personal' inability to absorb the ultimate truth or deficiencies caused by their 'environments', as explained in the elephant allegory. Taken together, these findings support strong recommendation to the continuous 'seeking' of truth, in tandem with 'speaking' of it in the way one believes it to be. That is to say that although I, as a Muslim, believe that the Qur'an gives me access to guidance and truth, I still believe that absorbing the Qur'anic truth itself is not static; it rather is dynamic, discursive and progressive. The Qur'an itself is believed to keep providing its readers with new insights that were never uncovered before to its previous readers. This suggests that the ultimate truth that humans seek after is not necessarily fully present yet in their minds, and that the Qur'an itself still have potential readings to offer. At the same time, it urges its readers to seek bits and pieces of truth wherever it arises. Therefore, theology is to be in the service of the ultimate truth, not the other way around.

NOTES

¹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-correspondence/>

² Alan R. White, 'Coherence Theory of Truth', in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 130-133.

³ See: Todd May, *Between Genealogy and Epistemology: Psychology, and Politics in the Thought of Michel Foucault* (USA, Penn State University Press, 2008).

⁴ See: Nicholas Rescher, *Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

- ⁵ See: William James, *The Meaning of Truth, A Sequel to 'Pragmatism'* (USA: University of Michigan Library, 1909).
- ⁶ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-correspondence/>
- ⁷ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-correspondence/>
- ⁸ <http://www.monthly-renaissance.com/issue/content.aspx?id=25>
- ⁹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-correspondence/>
- ¹⁰ Thomas C. Vinci, *Cartisian Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 192.
- ¹¹ Cyrus Masroori, *An Islamic Language of Toleration: Rumi's Criticism of Religious Persecution* (London: Sage Publications, 2010), p. 250.
- ¹² See: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Alchemy of Happiness* (Tehran: Elmi va Frahanji, 2004).
- ¹³ Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 8.
- ¹⁴ Gavin D'Costa, 'Theology of Religions' in *The Modern Theologians*, eds. David Ford and Rachel Muers (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 627.
- ¹⁵ D'Costa, *Ibid*, p. 627.
- ¹⁶ D'Costa, *Ibid*, p. 627.
- ¹⁷ Hick, *Universe of Faiths*, p. 141.
- ¹⁸ John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 159.
- ¹⁹ Hick, *Universe of Faiths*, p. 132.
- ²⁰ William Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: a New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).
- ²¹ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 235.
- ²² <http://wri.leaderu.com/theology/hick.html>
- ²³ Hick, *Interpretation*, p. 368.
- ²⁴ Hick, *Interpretation*, p. 370.
- ²⁵ Hick, *Interpretation*, p. 371.
- ²⁶ Aslan, *Religious Pluralism* p. 116.
- ²⁷ Aslan, *Religious Pluralism*, p. 110.
- ²⁸ Aslan, *Religious Pluralism*, p. 111.
- ²⁹ Aslan, *Religious Pluralism*, p. 111.
- ³⁰ Aslan, *Religious Pluralism*, p. 114.
- ³¹ Seyyed Nasr, *the Need for a Sacred Science* (London: Curzon Press, 1993), p. 8.
- ³² John S. Bowden, 'Perennial Philosophy and Christianity', in *Christianity: The Complete Guide* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 1-5.
- ³³ Hick, *Universe of Faiths*, p. 146.
- ³⁴ Aslan, *Religious Pluralism*, p. 124.
- ³⁵ Aslan, *Religious Pluralism*, p. 117.
- ³⁶ Aslan, *Religious Pluralism*, p. 118.
- ³⁷ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 292.