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Chapter 3: Religious Pluralism (Part 1)

The Great Crisis of our Age

If we called the age in which we live, especially the past decades, the age of cultural crisis, we would not have chosen a bad label. In the history of human civilization, there are different periods which have been described variedly depending on the unique occasions in each period. But, perhaps, in no period before when in most countries in the world a cultural crisis, which is likewise called the identity crisis, had been to such extent as it is now. Nowadays, if we take a look at the cultural problems in the advanced countries, we will witness an astonishing confusion, bewilderment, uncertainty, and finally, intense intellectual skepticism whose extent has been unprecedented throughout history.

During the distant past, a group of "Sophists" emerged in the cultural sphere of ancient Greece and existed for some time, but this movement was soon relegated to oblivion. During the first two centuries of the Common Era, once again the wave of skepticism or agnosticism appeared through Pyrrho1 and some of his advocates which also did not last long. The third wave of this movement appeared after the Renaissance which had, more or less, greater influence and wider scope compared to the first two waves, but again, it was still not very widespread as to encompass all of the cultural and academic centers of the world. In recent decades, however, a new wave of skepticism has surfaced whose extent and intensity surpassed that of all the previous waves so much so that we have to say that with the exception of a few cases, all cultural, intellectual and academic centers of the world have been subjected to cultural agitation and bewilderment.

Different philosophies and schools of skepticism, subjectivism and the like, though outwardly may not imply "skepticism", their essence is nothing but elements of skepticism, have mushroomed. The cultural atmosphere of the world has become such that if a person claims objectivity and certainty, this act is treated as something reproachable and negative, and if someone is to be belittled, he will be branded as an objectivist and a votary of dogmatism. Today, objectivism is regarded as an abusive language in the academic parlance while skepticism, relativism and negation of absolutism have so pervaded in the intellectual and cultural atmosphere of the world in that if some people claim having certain convictions,

saying that they believe in certain things and perfectly understand them, they will be accused of simple-mindedness, improvidence, silliness, and lack of deep understanding and knowledge.

I have said once elsewhere that if we call this age the age of modern ignorance [jahiliyyah], this will not be inaccurate, for it is a source of pride now to say, "We do not know." It is said that we have to reach the stage where we will understand well that everything is doubtful and that no certain thing ever exists. That is to confess ignorance and doubt with respect to everything. This is modern ignorance we are facing today in contrast to the ignorance that the Holy Qur'an describes as the "former Times of Ignorance" [al-jahiliyyah al-ula (33:33)].

Anyway, according to them, dogmatism and objectivism cause one's crookedness of understanding and silliness, but according to us, skepticism and belief in relativity in everything which the world today is defending are nothing but ignorance and unawareness. We have learned from the Qur'an that we have to be in pursuit of certainty and certain knowledge and of drawing the curtains of doubt and uncertainty. In its very first page and at the beginning of *Surah al–Baqarah*, the Qur'an states:

... and are certain of the hereafter. (2:4)

The culture of the Qur'an is such that whenever it wants to reproach, rebuke and criticize certain individuals and groups, it brands them as "people of doubt." It is the opposite of what exists in the world today; if certain individuals are supposed to be branded with something unwholesome in the academic parlance, they will be called as "people of certainty!"

Pluralism, Indulgence and Negligence: Tools at the Hands of the Crisis-Mongers

In any case, according to us, belief in relativism and skepticism is a great menace for the human society, or at least to our society, and it causes the fading away of the values, culture and beliefs for the sake of which we offered sacrifices and for centuries we longed their realization until finally the same has been materialized during the recent decades. Now, the question is: What shall we do with this wave of skepticism in the world which, in our view, is a pervasive crisis and hazardous disease? As an Islamic government and country, what Iran has to do in the realm of culture, apart from the tasks to be done in the spheres of economy, industry and science? Of course, by culture we do not mean its modern implication which only includes dancing, singing and music.

Instead, we mean the religious beliefs and values. In our view, Islam possesses a set of definite, pristine and fixed principles and values. Our duty is firstly to preserve them and secondly to invite others to get to know them, and not to withdraw and be passive in facing the waves of secularism, liberalism and

hundreds of other isms. Today, by adopting diverse cultural schemes, the enemies of our nation are trying to cast doubt upon the beliefs, values and convictions of our people, especially the youths. One of these schemes is the promotion of an idea called "pluralism" which is so dangerous, and because of its importance, there is a need for us to address it.

The pluralists claim, "Human beings have different ideas and diverse opinions, and every idea and opinion that is acceptable to a person or society is worthy of respect, and we have to treat them with respect. Of course, if we have also certain idea and opinion, others should respect them. We should not oppose the ideas of others nor refuse to replace our idea with that of others. No one should regard as absolute his own idea and opinion. It should be borne in mind instead that there are others who have different ideas and opinions. What is the basis that your idea is correct while the ideas and views of others are not?

On what basis are you charging as erroneous the ideas and views of others while considering yours as the truth? If you are Muslims and are professing Islam, there are also others who accept Christianity, Buddhism and other creeds. There is no reason at all that your Islam is superior to the other creeds. We have to respect one another and treat as respectable each other's belief. We should not have bigotry and endeavor to definitely bring others to the fold of our creed and faith. We have to treat the ideas and beliefs of others with indulgence and negligence, and also entertain in our mind the probability that others are true and say what is right."

As indicated, this idea is actually a tool in the hands of the imperialist powers in the world firstly, to prevent the spread of the Islamic culture in general and the Islamic Revolution in Iran in particular, and secondly, to pave the way for the penetration of the materialistic and atheistic culture of the West. As of the moment, we witness that in some publications, tribunes and speeches, the same way of thinking is promoted and its scope of influence is such that even some figures and personalities who have never been expected to succumb to such concepts have been under the influence of this idea.

Our Heavy Responsibility to the Youth

During the lifetime of the eminent Imam(r), because of the greatness of his personality, he had exerted such influence upon the minds and feelings of his followers that the people were passionately fond of him, and his behavior, views and words were unconditionally and undoubtedly the paradigm for the thinking and action of all people and officials and the criterion of their movement. But this matter necessitated his exceptional personality, and since such a thing will not remain always for all generations, we have to think that if those ideas and ways were indeed correct, as they were, we have to defend them through argument and logic, consolidate their foundations and promote them.

For the future generation, it is not enough to say that the Imam has said or done so. It is natural that the zeal and ardor that we used to see on the first generation of the Islamic Revolution and in those volunteer mobilization forces [*Basijis*] who were fond of martyrdom, battlefront and war will not exist in

the future generation and those who have not seen from a close distance the celestial countenance of the Imam nor listened every day or every week to his speeches that are full of wisdom. For them, we have to think of logical explanations and strong and convincing arguments.

Surely, if we put ourselves in the place of these youth who have newly attained puberty, acquired independent thinking, and encountered diverse and contradictory claims, views and cultures, we will see that the issue is not as simple as we think. For these youths, this question is actually posed: In the midst of all these various and contradictory ideas and views, what is the proof that only the opinion, view and way of the Imam Khomeini (r) are correct? What is the ultimate reason that Islam is the best religion and way of life?

Is there no multitude of followers of Christianity and other religions? How to know that their religion and beliefs are not better than Islam and that of the Imam? Why should I accept Islam, the Revolution and the Imam? These and other similar questions are the issues existing in the minds of our youths and are troubling them. There are even times when they explicitly pose and express them. Having said this, it is evident that the necessary ground and favorable condition for the propagation for pluralism are completely present in the realm of religion and culture.

In reply to the above and similar questions, pluralism states thus: "You may choose the one you like from among the different existing religions. All of them are similar and equal to one another. They have differences, more or less, but they are all good religions! If there are one billion in the world today, it is not a proof for the superiority and more credibility of Islam, because another five million believe in another thing than Islam."

In various countries of the world, I myself encountered people who were Christians but had a good idea about Islam. Whenever I would ask them, "So, why don't you embrace Islam?" they would say in reply that Christianity is also a good religion. Even higher than them, today, the Pope himself acknowledges that Islam is a progressive and excellent religion. Of course, he never says that Christianity is bad, or that Islam is better than Christianity. When the "leader of the Christian world" announces that Islam is a very good religion, it automatically implies that we have two good religions; one is Islam while the other is Christianity. If you would meet the leader of the Buddhists Buddhism being a religion followed by millions of people in the world probably he will also say that Buddhism is good and so is Islam.

This is called religious pluralism. That is, we do not have a single good and authentic religion; rather, we have many. No one should unreasonably insist that to become Muslim is the prerequisite for admission to paradise and attainment of bliss. Rather, a Christian, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, and others may also be admitted to heaven and attain felicity. Similarly, within a religion, the different schools of thought [madhahib] have no preference over one another, since all of them are good and in truth. In Islam, for example, Sunnis and Shi'ah should not charge each other as erroneous, or in Christianity, the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox should not accuse one another of being misguided.

What Pluralists Say?

With the aim of proving religious pluralism, pluralists cite other examples outside pluralism. For example, they claim that today the countries in the world are administered through various political systems and regimes. In some advanced countries such as the UK and Japan, constitutional monarchial system exists. In many others, it is republicanism. Among the republican countries, some are presidential while others are parliamentary. In political philosophy, whenever the different political systems are discussed, a definite answer will not be given in reply to the question, "Which of these systems is the best?" Instead, it will be said that each of them has its peculiar advantages and limitations.

Therefore, none of them could be considered bad. All of them are good in one way or another. This is what is called political pluralism. That is, in choosing the political system, there is no need to say that a certain system is good and right, while the rest are wrong and defective. In the same vein, the multiplicity of parties and party coalitions in forming a government or cabinet is another example of political pluralism. Among the various parties with diverse and varied political views and stances existing in a country, it cannot be said that only one specific party is right while the rest have to be set aside.

In principle, in the world today, if the overwhelming majority of people in a country support only a single party, it is regarded as sign of backwardness and retrogression. It is believed that the advanced countries and civilized societies have definitely multiple political inclinations, and each group of people supports a particular party. Basically, it is this contradiction and disagreement in the stance of the different parties that fosters competition among the parties and makes the non–ruling parties watchful of the performance of the ruling party or parties and for every party to report the mistakes and weaknesses of the other party. In this manner, all parties are watchful of their own performance and trying to improve their performance by minimizing their deviations, weaknesses and errors so that they could win the vote of the people.

All of these, in the end, lead to the improvement of the entire performance of the officials and statesmen of a country, which in turn, is beneficial to the public. For this reason, we can see that political pluralism and multiparty system is a desirable and beneficial affair, and one–party political systems and tendencies are usually less effective in comparison to multiparty systems and tendencies.

Also, in the economic sphere, it is so evident that the multiplicity and diversity of the economic poles and powers is desirable, and the single-pole economy has ample disadvantages and loopholes and is indefensible. In the sphere where there are numerous economic poles, there is competition among them, and as a result of this competition, higher quality, and at the same time, cheaper goods and services will be given to the costumers and consumers while the economic growth and development will have also desirable trend. Whereas, in a single pole economy, monopoly arises, and as the effect of the absence of competition, usually, there will be less motive to improve the quality or lessen the price, and the trend of growth and progress is slow. Therefore, economic pluralism is also desirable, beneficial and

justifiable.

By mentioning such cases, pluralists conclude that just as pluralism and multiplicity in such spheres like politics and economics is desirable and beneficial, there must also be pluralism in the sphere of religion and culture, and the way for the emergence of religions in the society must also be completely paved. With respect to belief and conviction of the heart, we also have to believe that no religion is superior, and that acceptance of any of them is as valuable as acceptance of the rest.

To divide them into true and false, perfect and defective, good and bad, and other similar differentiations is totally baseless and meaningless. Islam and Christianity, Shi'ah and Sunni, Catholic and Protestant, and all religions, sects and schools of thought are ways toward the truth and paths leading to the destination and the shore of salvation. Fanaticism and rigidity on any of them is a sign of illogicality and imprudence. Just as he accepts economic and political pluralism, a rational and wise person has also the same belief in the realm of religion, and for him, multiplicity of religions is a totally natural, rational and acceptable matter.

In any case, this is an idea which is promoted today in our society through various means. As we have indicated earlier, for our youth there is really the right to pose question. Just as we accept multiplicity in the domains of politics and economics, and for instance, in the economic domain economists have no consensus of opinion on implementing the policy of expanding exports and minimizing imports to attain growth and development of a certain country and that this difference in opinion is totally a natural phenomenon and there is no need at all for them to arrive at a consensus, what is wrong then if this becomes the case in matters of religion and culture? By the way, why do I have to profess Islam and not Christianity? What is the need for professing a religion and believing in the existence of God? Many people deny God or are doubtful and skeptical of His existence. This is also a form of belief which is equal to the rest of beliefs, and why should I not accept such a belief, too?

In this manner, we can observe that the issue is indeed serious. It is far beyond an article, an author and a book. It requires us to fasten our seatbelt, and by presenting logical and reasonable answers, we have to entertain the inquiries of our young generation and solve for them this doubt.

A Critique of the First Proposition of the Pluralists

In refutation of the above proposition in support of pluralism, firstly, we have to state that logically speaking, acceptance of multiplicity in politics and economics does not necessary mean acceptance of multiplicity in religion and culture. In other words, in the said proposition, it is argued that "Since pluralism in economics and politics and some other affairs is desirable and beneficial, it follows that the same is desirable and beneficial in the realm of culture and religion." Our main contention is that this proposition is a mere claim and no proof is presented to support it. It is similar to the case when one says, "Since the presence of eleven players in a soccer game is desirable and beneficial, it follows that the presence of the same number of players in volleyball is desirable and beneficial!" Exactly just as the

second claim is baseless and unbelievable, so is the first claim. Let us elaborate on this.

It is true that we have questions in such fields like economics and politics that have more than one answer, and that multiplicity and diversity concerning them is possibly desirable. Yet, there are also questions in other fields like mathematics, physics, geometry, and the like that do not have more than one answer, and multiple correct answers for them are inconceivable and unacceptable. In mathematics, for instance, two times two does not have more than one answer and that is four.

In geometry, the aggregate of triangular angles in a plane surface does not have more than one answer and that is 180 degrees. Computation of the distance covered by a moving object at a specific time with a determined speed does not have more than one answer which is computed by using the formula, v(t)=d, where v stands for velocity, t represents time and d as distance. Could anyone say that as in the case of economic problems and political issues where there are various opinions and there is no such thing as a single correct answer, the same is true in the case of two times two, and every mathematician could give an answer different from the others, and that in fact, there is the probability that each of them is wrong or correct? It is important to note that mathematical problem or something similar to it may have two or many ways of solving it, but the point is that finally, all these ways of solving will arrive at the same correct answer. Having many solutions is different from having many answers.

Therefore, in the realm of knowledge and human phenomena, we have problems which could have more than one answer. We have also other problems each of which has no more than one answer. The main question regarding religious pluralism is that how it could be determined that religion does not belong to those problems having no more than one answer. If you say that religion is like economics and politics in which there are many answers and pluralism is desirable and beneficial, we can also say that it is not so. Religion is like physics and mathematics in which every problem has no more than one answer. We claim that the question, "Does God exist or not?" is like the arithmetic problem, "Two times two is equal to what?" which has one and only one answer.

The Pluralists' Resort to another Basis

Trying to prove their claim, the proponents of religious pluralism resort to a different proposition, saying, "Human affairs can be divided into two. Some affairs are real and true while some others are extrinsic and conventional. Real and true affairs are those you claim having no more than a single answer. They are things which could be proved and perceived through senses and experience. But regarding the extrinsic and conventional affairs, as their name implies, they have no truth and reality other than agreement, relish and taste of human beings. For this reason, they change according to the agreement, relish and taste of individuals and societies. This is contrary to the real affairs; for example, the dimension of a certain room does not follow relish, taste and what is conventional.

Instead, in truth and in fact, the dimension of the said room is equivalent to the mosaics spread in its floor. In extrinsic and conventional affairs, there is essentially no point in using descriptions such as

better and worse, good and bad, right and wrong, and the like, and in case we want to use them anyway, we have to say that all of them are good, right, excellent, and that there is nothing bad, wrong, and poor among them. If someone is attracted to pink color while another is interested in green, none of them can charge the other of being wrong and use the descriptions such as bad, incorrect and false in describing the other's taste. It must be said instead that both pink and green are good and beautiful. In a nutshell, extrinsic affairs and issues do not have a single answer as they can have more than one answer.

Pluralists claim that religion, culture and moral values belong to the extrinsic affairs and they follow taste, liking and what is conventional. Just as there is no single reply to the question, "Which color is better?" and to be more exact, such a question is meaningless in reply to the question, "Which religion, culture, or set of moral values is better or correct?" a single choice cannot be specified. In other words, in essence such a question is meaningless. If someone prefers Islam as religion, so be it! If another one accepts Christianity, so be it! If someone says that God is One, that will be correct; and if another one claims that God assumes the form of a trinity, that will be correct, too.

And more serious than this, if someone says that there is God while another claims the opposite, both statements are correct and truthful. I would like to pray facing the Bayt al-Maqdis (in Jerusalem) and there is no problem if you would like to pray facing the Ka'bah (in Mecca). Both ways are good. Just as I may prefer a certain food while you like another food, I profess Islam as religion and you Buddhism. None of which can be regarded as more preferable to the other, neither is there any dispute between us because both religions are good. In the Western culture, thumbs up are a symbol of approval, success and triumph, while in the Iranian culture, the same is treated as a sign of abuse and disparagement. Nevertheless, on account of such a gesture, we cannot condemn the Westerners because it is merely a conventional affair. The same is true in the case of religious affairs.

The issue we have mentioned above and cited by the pluralists in their attempt to prove religious pluralism is technically called "moral relativity." The gist of argument of moral relativity is that good and bad, as well as moral and ethical issues have no reality but taste and what is agreed upon. There may be difference among various societies and individuals. Just as the taste of food and ideal and pleasant color vary among different people, good and bad and moral values have the same ruling. Just as we do not have absolute good regarding food and color, and every food and color are good for some people while unacceptable for others, acceptability and unacceptability of values and moral issues may also vary among different peoples and societies.

So, the trend of the discussion has so far assumed this form: In the beginning, pluralists say that since pluralism in such fields as economics and politics is desirable and beneficial, we believe that pluralism in the realm of religion is also desirable and beneficial. In reply to this contention, we say that there are also issues such as that of physics and mathematics each of which has only one answer. Why should religious choices not be like the solutions in mathematics and physics? Here, pluralists raise the issue of

moral relativity, and by citing some moral and social customs and traditions, we firstly want to prove that the general feature of moral issues is relativism so that they can conclude that religion, which belongs to moral issues, is also a relative and subjective matter.

The Third Attempt to Prove Pluralism

In continuation, pluralists take a step further and claim that in essence, all knowledge and human issues in all fields of life succumbed to relativity in one way or another and that in principle, there is no such thing as non-relative or non-subjective knowledge. Yet, in some cases, this relativism is perfectly clear and everybody can notice and easily confirm it while in other cases, it is not so clear and people imagine that in those cases they have acquired absolute and inalterable knowledge though that is not the case. This is the same thing we have mentioned at the beginning.

We have said that the truth of the claim to relativity in knowledge is nothing but the same skepticism or agnosticism, which have appeared among the philosophers and scholars in two or three waves before the recent decades, and before and after the Common Era. Yet, it was not widespread and it did not have much influence then. Its last wave has been so widespread and pervasive, encompassing the intellectual and cultural centers of the present world. The source of pride of a scholar is to say, "I do not know and I am doubtful." If one claims knowledge and certainty, such an act is regarded as a sign of one's silliness as a result of one's poor level of knowledge and understanding.

In sum, if the entire human knowledge is relative, religion and religious knowledge will not remain safe; rather, they will become relative and changeable. The result will be for us to say that according to society A, Christianity is good, correct and rightful; while in the view of society B, it is the religion of Islam. In relation to the same society, it is possible that at one time a certain religion is good and rightful while at another time, it is another religion. And it is also uncertain which one is the true. Indeed, the truth is the issue of relativity, and with respect to a certain time and society, the truth is one thing while in relation to another time and society, the truth is another thing.

In their attempt to prove religious pluralism, Muslim pluralists (or to be more exact, pluralists who are feigning Islam) sometimes cite verses of the Qur'an and traditions. At another time, they resort to some passages from the statements and poems of Mawlawi, Hafiz, 'Attar, 4 and others who have said that the Ka'bah, idol-temple, mosque, and synagogue, in spite of their outward differences, are all manifestations of search for God, worship of God and a single truth:

My purpose in [going to] the Ka'bah and the idol-temple is to enter in You.

To come inside the Ka'bah and the idol-temple is just a pretext.

In this manner, the trend of the discussion in pluralism begins with multiplicity in social issues and followed by discussion on moral relativism, and it finally reaches relativism in human knowledge. It is so

evident that through acceptance of pluralism, there will be no more need to cling to Islam, the Imam, the Islamic Revolution, and moral values, and any belief, deeds, behavior, and moral corruption can easily be justified. In the sequel to this discussion, we have to meticulously study and assess each of these subjects, and reveal the truth of the matter concerning them.

- 1. Pyrrho of Elis, whose primary concern was ethics, maintained that human beings can know nothing of the real nature of things, and that consequently the wise person will suspend judgment. [Trans.]
- 2. Mawlawi, Jalal ad-Din ar-Rimi (1207-1273) was the greatest mystic poet in the Persian language and the founder of the Mawlawiyyah order of dervishes (The Whirling Dervishes). He is famous for his lyrics and for his didactic epic, Mathnawi-ye Mathnawi (Spiritual Couplets). [Trans.]
- <u>3.</u> Khwajah Shams ad-Din Muhammad Hafiz Shirazi (ca. 1325–1391) was the 14th century Persian lyric bard and panegyrist, and commonly considered as the preeminent master of the ghazal form. [Trans.]
- 4. Farid ad–Din Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-'Attar al-Nayshab®ri (1145?-1221?): a Sufi Persian poet, whose most celebrated work is Mantiq at-Tayr (The Conference of the Birds), a poem consisting of 4,600 couplets (two successive lines of verse that rhyme, forming a single unit). [Trans.]

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