

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND THE PROBLEM OF TRUTH CLAIMS

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Abstract

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi mengapa klaim kebenaran muncul dan menjadi masalah serius di antara agama-agama, dan bagaimana mengatasinya berikutnya terutama untuk membangun dialog antaragama di era pluralisme. Ia mencoba untuk meneliti masalah klaim kebenaran dan bagaimana menyelesaikannya dalam rangka dialog. Makalah ini dimaksudkan untuk mewujudkan langkah-langkah mengatasi masalah klaim kebenaran di antara agama-agama dan berusaha untuk saling pengertian untuk membangun pandangan pluralistik dalam bingkai dialog antaragama. Untuk mengatasi masalah klaim kebenaran dalam dialog agama, ada tiga langkah yang dapat dilakukan yaitu: pertama, pandangan eksklusif. Kedua pandangan, inklusif. Langkah terakhir adalah pandangan pluralistik.

This article explores why the truth claims emerge and become a serious problem among religions, and how to handle it next to build inter-religious dialogue, especially in the era of pluralism. He tried to examine the issue of truth claims and how to solve them within the framework of dialogue. This paper is intended to implement concrete steps to overcome the problem of truth claims among religions and strive for mutual understanding to build a pluralistic view of interreligious dialogue in the frame. To overcome the problem of truth claims in religion dialogue, there are three steps that can be done: first, an exclusive view. Both views, inclusive. The final step is a pluralistic outlook.

Key words: interreligious dialogue, truth claims.

A. Prologue

To strive for a fruitful interreligious dialogue in the pluralism era, the problem of truth claims is an obvious and crucial issue to be discussed and solved. Religions typically make claims to state truths; it is unavoidable to make specific truth claims among religions.¹

To claim that there are meaningful tenets within every religion may be very useful for human beings but they will become harmful when they are elevated to the level of absolute truth and built into the belief system of a religious community.² For instance, Hindus believe that temporal existence is beginningless and endless, vast eons succeeding one another in an eternal cyclical process, whereas Jews, Christians and Muslims believe that the universe began through the creative fiat of God and will end in a climactic divine judgment. Hindus and Buddhists believe that we live many times on this earth or the *karmic* system entering again and again into the stream of human life to form new psycho-physical persons, whereas Jews, Christians and Muslims believe that we live only once and then face an eternal heaven and hell. These issues will be a serious and unsolved problem if all religions merely absolutize all tenets, because they can lead to attack each other. Several conflicts occurred in this country such as in Central Sulawesi and Ambon tends to slip into religious conflict

They are just a few of the doctrinal disagreements within the major religions. Of course, there are many tenets and beliefs within religions that lead to the conflict of truth claims. Hence, it is important to study and explore why the truth claims emerge and become a serious problem among religions, and how to overcome them next particularly for building interreligious dialogue in the pluralism era.

Therefore, this paper attempts to scrutinize the problem of truth claims and how to solve them in the frame of interreligious dialogue.

¹ Ward, J.S.K, "The Question of Truth in Religion" in *Journal of Dharma*, Vol.XIX.July-September, 1994.No.3, 1994, p.209

²John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), p.50. In this book, Hick scrutinizes comprehensively the historical background of absolute claims within religions.

B. Historical Conflict of Truth Claims

According to Hick³, at least there are three causes of the emergence of conflicting truth claims among religions. Firstly, there are disagreements about what are in principle straightforward matters of historical fact. He asserts that one level consists of differences of historical belief, which carry significant theological implication; for example, Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross whilst Muslims believe that He only appeared to die. This Christian-Muslim difference has implications for their interpretation of atonement doctrine for which Jesus' physical death was of the essence of his atoning sacrifice. On the Muslim side there is the unresolved debate about whether the prophet Muhammad did or did not appoint Ali as his successor, which lies at the root of the division between *Shias* and *Sunnis*. Such historical disagreement whether between or within traditions could only properly be settled by historical evidence.

To solve this problem, Hick suggested,

“Since those doctrines invariably refer to the events of many centuries ago, concerning which the available evidence is fragmentary and inconclusive, they usually cannot in fact be settled on purely historical grounds and tend in practice to be decided by the pull of wider theological consideration. For some believers these historical issues are fundamentally divisive, for others not. Here I would urge that we should all school ourselves to tolerate and live with such disagreement”.⁴

Secondly, there are disagreements about issues of what might be called quasi-historical or trans-historical differences, such as the problem in the acceptance or rejection of the doctrine of reincarnation. This doctrine is affirmed by Hindus and Buddhists but rejected by Christians, Jews, and Muslims. To overcome the difficulty, it should be seen as a mythological truth rather than a literal truth; yet, such development would of course have wide reverberations throughout the respective belief systems. Hence, this kind of disagreement should be

³ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion; Human Responses to Transcendent*, (USA: Yale University Press), 1989, p. 363. The problem of truth claims also elaborated frankly by him in his article *On Conflicting Religious Truth-Claims*, *Journal Religious Studies*, Vol.19.1983.p.485-491

⁴ John Hick, *On Conflicting Religious Truth-Claims*, p. 486

seen as a system of beliefs that every religion actually has; it will be no problem to the other adherents of religion if they perceive it as an absolute truth.

And thirdly, there are different stories of pictures professing to answer the ultimate questions about nature of the Real and about the source and destiny of humanity and of the universe of which we are a part. There are differences in the ways of conceiving and experiencing, and hence, also responding to the Divine Reality. The major division, of course, is that between the awareness of the divine as personal and as non-personal.

In this point, according to Hick, there are two basic concepts, which are central to the different form of religious experience i.e. the concept of deity or the Real as personal and the concept of the Absolute or the Real as non-personal. This conception as Hick suggested is the transformation of human existence from *self-centeredness* to *Reality-centeredness*.⁵

By paying attention to his theory, the first notion in which every follower of religion ought to put it as fundamental understanding is the transformative process of religious experience. It means that by learning from different religious entities, one can get new insight and self-consciousness. This basic commitment will lead him/her into the unfinished process to grasp the Reality, the more someone can transform his/herself, the more he/she will achieve what so called "religiosity".

C. Deabsolutization of Truth

Considering the aforementioned historical problem of truth claims, it is really important to shift and deconstruct our historical understanding of truth since we realize that our understanding and interpretation about truth is constructed by a historical framework. Our perspective of truth has been shaped by Western notions of truth to be absolute, static, and exclusive.⁶

⁵ Hick offers this concept in the sense of transformation of human existence specifically for building pluralism, see this thesis in *On Conflicting Religious Truth-Claims*, p.487-488.

⁶ See, Leonard J. Swidler, *After the Absolute; The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection*, p.7-8

Thus, that paradigm must be shifted in mind; we need a new paradigm. Swidler's thesis, which I call the *deabsolutization*,⁷ should be a proper starting point to construct the new paradigm to solve the problem of truth claims. He classifies into six relational aspects of the new views of truth.

The first is *historicism*; truth is deabsolutized by the perception that reality is always described in terms of the circumstances in which it is expressed. In other words, the meaning of a text could be found only in context. Thus, all statements about the meaning of things have to be now seen non-absolutely in terms of time.

The second is *intentionality* i.e. seeking the truth with the intention of acting accordingly deabsolutizes the truth statement. Hence, the truth of the meaning of things is seen as deabsolutized by the action-oriented intentionality of the thinker-speaker.

The third is *sociology of knowledge*; truth is deabsolutized in terms of geography, culture, and social standing. Thereby, all statements of truth should be seen in a deabsolutized perspective by considering sociological factors such as culture, class, and gender of the thinker-speaker.

The fourth is *limits of language* i.e. truth as the meaning of something and especially as talk about the transcendent is deabsolutized by the nature of human beings. So, any statement about the transcendent, which goes beyond our experience, must be deabsolutized and limited far beyond the perspectival character seen in ordinary statements.

The fifth is *hermeneutics*; all truth and all knowledge are seen as interpreted truth and knowledge, and hence are deabsolutized by the observer who is always also an interpreter. Hence, all knowledge about a text is at the same time an interpretation of the text, furthermore, claims about the "true" meaning of the text should be deabsolutized.

⁷ I like to present the term "deabsolutization" since this epistemological concept is very significant for the next building of interreligious dialogue, so for further discussion of the concept offered by Leonard J. Swidler, see his book, *After the Absolute; The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection*, p.7-14. The problem of criteria by which truth claims must be assessed also discussed comprehensively by Hendrik M. Vroom in his book, *Religions and the Truth; Philosophical Reflection and Perspective*, see, p.21-42.

The last is *dialogue*. It is a further development; a basic insight that learning is not only by being merely open or passive to, but by being in dialogue with extramental reality. It means that we not only hear and receive reality but also “speak” to reality. This is a dialogic view of truth whose very name reflects its relationality. Thus, the knower engages reality in dialogue in a language in which the knower provides, thereby deabsolutizing all statements of truth about reality.

D. How to Solve the Problem of Truth Claims

Based on the historical construction expounded by John Hick and the offering new paradigm of understanding truth from Leonard J. Swidler above, I would like to conceptualize the steps to overcome the problem of truth claims among religions and to strive for a mutual understanding to build pluralistic outlook in the frame of the interreligious dialogue.

The first step is *exclusive outlook*. It means that within every religion there are many unique and different beliefs, notions, faiths, and even truths that can be found in the other religions. Thus, every adherent of a certain religion can perform and interpret them based on his/her religious thought and experience, yet, one should consider that everyone else also has the same right to perform and interpret his/her own religion.

For instance, I embrace Islam as my religion; I believe that the tenets and teachings of Islam has shaped me to how I actualize them in daily life, yet, I realize that there are various kinds of people beyond my life; and that they also are like me (in actualizing their live based on their different religions). Should I attack them since they are different with me? If I do that (accusing them), automatically I still entrap my insight in absolute truth claim.

So, in this step, the first mean point is considering that there are many entities (communities or religions) with different attitudes and performances; realizing that every entity has a right to live harmoniously.

The second step is *inclusive outlook*. This step is likely first step yet considerably there are many similar and the same notions outside or beyond a certain religion. So, one not only has to not attack the other, but also has to be open-minded to share with another entity

in order to get lighter insight and to tighten his/her religious commitment forward.

Just to regard and to continue the first example, I can share my religious outlook to my neighbors and friends (of course they are from different religions) but not in the sense to interfere (or moreover attack them) their notion and insight but I will get a lighter insight, for instance I will say, "Oh yes, I see what you mean by that, it is exactly the same as I mean by this".⁸ This dialogical sharing is a starting point to come to a pluralistic outlook.

The last step is *pluralistic outlook*. This point is shifting ahead from the first and second step; it means that there are various entities and realities beyond a certain religion. They may be similar or absolutely different from, since they have been developing on their own historical-cultural background; nevertheless, they have influenced each other along with the development directly or indirectly. In this point, one will consider there are many colorful and meaningful notions beyond his/her own that correspondingly lead to transform and give a new vision to him/her. Furthermore, every adherent of a religion will share open-mindedly in interreligious dialogue and transform his/her outlook.

To step and shift forward from the first step and the second step, I will intensify mutual dialogical sharing with the others, so I can transform my insight of religiosity and run my role in the societal context as co-worker with other adherents of religion.

That's probably in line with and making a sense of the concept offered by Hick i.e. *self-centeredness* to *Reality-centeredness*. If every adherent of religion recognizes and considers that his/her insight in understanding the truths is never fixed; it should be complemented by another and will complement the other, he/she will, step by step will get a lighter insight of truths.

⁸ I take this utterance from Harold Coward's book *Pluralism in the World Religions; a Short Introduction* whilst he particularly discusses about the future of theology and the limits inherent in pluralism. See *Pluralism in the World Religions; a Short Introduction*, (Boston: One World Oxford, 2000), p.148.

To close the discussion, I would like to present the ultimate vision of Ninian Smart⁹ as his reflective religiosity, in which he envisions our next insight into religiosity,

“So our moral and intellectual life has to open, and is thus ultimately driven by liberal principles. So it is that there are no fixed dogmas and no unrevisable affirmations of faith. Our faith has to open, outward looking, and so bound up with free seeking of the spirit. Moreover, our knowledge is always open, ranging from the flourish of spiritual experience to the new discoveries of science. In this vision it is possible to fuse together the insights of science, faith, the numinous, the mystical, the incarnational, morality, open politics, artistic creativity.... We look forward to a great collective human quest, which takes up the themes of differing civilizations. Let them complement one another”.

So, let us be a complementary man of religion since we will never become a perfect person. If we still consider that we have achieved the *Real* Truth, it means that we have reached the Absolute. Can we reach the Absolute?

E. Conclusion

The problem of truth claims is really crucial in the frame of interreligious dialogue, yet it is not a utopian striving to solve it. It is time to work together, to overcome our historical construction i.e. truth claims. We have to deabsolutize our historical frame of truth in the sense that our truth is never fixed; it should be in dialogical and dialectical circumstances in order to get a clearer and brighter insight. We must shift our insight of religiosity from self-centered into Real-centered.

There are at least three steps to overcome the problem of truth claims. Firstly; everyone considers that there are many entities (communities or religions) with different attitudes and performances and realizing that every entity has a right to live harmoniously. That's *an exclusive outlook*. Secondly, one not only has to not attack the

⁹ I quote this expressive notion from the very visionary and fruitful book especially for the people of religion in the pluralism era i.e. *Ultimate Visions; Reflection on the Religious We Choose* edited by Martin Forward, see further, p.265.

other since he/she considers that there are many different entities beyond his/her life, but also has to be open-minded to share to another entity in order to get transformative insight and to tighten his/her religious commitment forward or we can call as *an inclusive outlook*. Lastly, every adherent of religion will share open-mindedly in interreligious dialogue since he/she admits that everyone's insight will complement to and will be complemented by another's, so he/she can transform his/her outlook and get a new vision of religiosity or we may call *a pluralistic outlook*.

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