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Principles of Religious Pluralism

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Abstract: Religious pluralism is growing in significance because of increasing religious diversity and increasing religious conflicts, which cause unrest in contemporary society. Muslim perennialists represent one of many groups advocating for the common goals of religious pluralism and the reaffirmation of perennial wisdom, which lies at the heart of all primordial religious traditions. The purpose of the study is to explore the principles of religious pluralism advocated by Muslim perennialist philosophers. Using the discourse analysis methodology, this study analyzed the theological validity of the Muslim perennialist perspective for articulating interfaith dialogue and co-existence in multicultural societies. By conducting this critical analysis, the study concludes that the principles of religious pluralism advocated by Muslim perennialists are the means of bringing interfaith peaceful co-existence to society.

Keywords: perennial philosophy; religious pluralism; metaphysical oneness; esoteric and exoteric; tradition; co-existence



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1. Introduction

In today's multicultural society, religious pluralism has become a vital issue in people's lives (Soleha and Rahmawati 2020). According to religious pluralism, the transcendent and ultimate reality is experienced differently in human life, which leads to significant differences among the main objects of adoration in the world's religious traditions (Rowe 1999). In a political and interdisciplinary context, "Religious Pluralism" is a contested concept. In a theological context, the term "Religious Pluralism often advocate convergence, harmony and compatibility between different religious traditions" (Banchoff 2008, p. 4), opposing the concept of exclusivism. Religious pluralism refers to peaceful interactions between the different religious traditions that exist within the same cultural space.

For theologians and comparative religionists, the matter of inter-religious relationships and the necessity of mutual understanding take on new urgency; this question is also highly significant for those concerned with fostering a harmonious global community (Gada 2016). In twentieth century, philosophers and theologians of different religious traditions advocated for religious pluralism in response to the phenomenon of religious diversity (Burley 2020). In Christianity, John Hick is considered most prominent defender of religious pluralism, and he provided important insights for a theology of pluralism (Ibid).

As compared to the other Abrahamic faiths, the literature on pluralism in Islamic scriptures is extremely limited. Islam proclaims itself to be the sole religion intended for humanity; as such, the majority of Muslim theologians have, throughout history, fallen into the exclusivist category. For Muslims, Islam is the only and inevitable religion for humanity, and the validity of all other religions was abrogated after Muhammad (PBUH). "So, the understanding for the centuries within the mainstream Islamic tradition was that, in order to be saved and to experience salvation with God, one must be Muslim" (Ramadan 2013,

p. ix). While criticizing the exclusivist claim, Muslim pluralists declare that religions other than Islam “can be appreciated as being, at their origins, so many modes of submission to God” (Shah-Kazemi 2012, p. 98).

In Muslim history, Sūfīs are considered by many people to be the messengers of peace, tolerance, equality, love for all and hate for no one, and pluralism. Contrary to the majority of Muslim scholars’ belief that previous revelations were abrogated after the coming of Islam, Ibn‘Arabī (1165–1240) was of the view that they also contained a proportional light. Concerning abrogation, the Sheikh writes: “All the revealed religions are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad is like the light of the sun among the light of the stars” (Chittik 1994, p. 125).

Like Ibn‘Arabī, Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (1207–1273) described “a state of unity” in which he finds himself:

I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr, nor Muslim. I am not of the East, nor of the West, not of the land, nor of the sea . . . One I seek, one I know, One I see, one I call. He is the first, He is the Last, He is the outward, and He is the inward. (Rūmī 2008, p. 50)

In the modern period, different religious Muslim pluralists such as Ismā‘īl al-Fārūqī (1921–1986), Asghar Ali Engineer (1939–2013), Farid Esack (b. 1959), Abdulaziz Sachedina (b. 1942), and Mahmut Aydin (1964) have emphasised that the Qur’an affirms religious diversity and that a Salvific attitude is not limited to the religion of Islam.

Of all the pluralists in the Islamic tradition, Muslim perennialists are the most influential in advocating for the philosophy of religious pluralism (Bano and Ahmad 2020). Rene Guénon (1886–1951) and Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) were the main figures who founded the traditional school on the basis of traditional metaphysics in the twentieth century. This traditionalist school gave contemporary expression to the perennial philosophy of Sophia, or wisdom (Ferrer 2000). In the twenty-first century, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) continued this philosophical legacy, and affirmed that Sophia wisdom and perennial philosophy lie at the heart of all primordial religious traditions; this argument was made to solve religious conflicts in multireligious societies.

This research delves into Muslim perennialist perspectives on religious pluralism in a highly charged context, as the Muslim response to religious pluralism has acquired great theological and socio-cultural importance. This study is particularly concerned with the principles of Muslim perennialists who claim to articulate an appropriate Muslim approach to the religion in order to foster peaceful co-existence in multi-religious societies. As their perspective is unique and different to that of mainstream Islamic thought, there is an evident need to study and form an academic critique of Muslim perennialists’ perspective on religious pluralism.

2. Literature Review

The philosophy of religious pluralism is based on the fact that there are different world faiths which have different belief systems and ideas regarding the nature of divinity (Hosseini 2010). It is worth noting that the philosophy of religious pluralism does not deny the exclusivist tendency of all world religions, which is strong and unavoidable; however, this philosophy also tries to justify the need for the exclusivist tendencies of religions (Ibid).

It is claimed that the philosophy of religious pluralism emerged from modern philosophy, which is expounded in John Hick’s classical theory of religious pluralism and is deeply rooted in the principle of “Ultimate Truth”. However, the roots of the philosophy of religious pluralism and the principle that there are various manifestations of ultimate religious truth can be traced in perennial philosophy, which refers to the one universal path and various manifestations of the ultimate truth (Jones 2022).

The term “Perennialism” has many meanings and, according to one of the definitions, it is a form of religious pluralism (Draper 2020). The term “perennial philosophy” was first used in a history written by Agostino Steuco (1496–1549), who articulated the idea of perennial wisdom and contended that all major world religions are merely a reflection of

that wisdom (Schmitt 1966). Perennial philosophy had given rise to many different positions, but it was the 'Traditionalists' and 'Muslim Perennialists' who reaffirmed perennial philosophy in 1930s and 1940s. Muslim perennialism involves the idea of a universal path, which is different from the syncretic approach of Aldous Huxely (1945) (Jones 2022).

Philosophers and theologians comprehend and respond to the perennial philosophy in different ways.

Harry Oldmeadow (b.1947), a traditionalist philosopher (Oldmeadow and Oldmeadow 2011), shed light upon the writings of perennialist philosophers, with a particular focus on the destructive impact of modernity in the context of the convergence of different religious traditions. Oldmeadow highlights the work of the three founding fathers (René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Frithjof Schuon) of perennial philosophy in the modern world, who emphasize the timeless wisdom that lies at the heart of all religious traditions. Along with these founding philosophers, Oldmeadow also discusses the writing of many other contemporary perennial philosophers (Titus Burckhardt, Marco Pallis, Martin Lings, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr) who affirm the essential unity of all religions and, at the same time, preservation of their spiritual effectiveness.

Adnan Aslan (b. 1963) presents the twofold exposition of perennial philosophy. In his work (Aslan 1994) he shed light upon the views of John Hick and Seyyed Hussein Nasar on religious pluralism; he also discusses the censure of different facets of John Hick's and Nasar's philosophies.

Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen (b. 1953) (Legenhausen 2002) describes the basic tenets of perennial thought and criticizes perennial philosophers for being overly apologetic, and too nostalgic to offer a feasible approach for moving through and beyond modernity.

In the available literature, the principles of perennial philosophy are discussed in a comparative context and as an approach to move beyond modernity, but there is no comprehensive method for analyzing the principles of religious pluralism that perennial philosophers use as a basis for co-existence. To bridge this gap in the literature, this article offers an in-depth exploration of the principles of religious pluralism expounded by Muslim perennial philosophers in twentieth and twenty-first centuries; it also presents a critique of the theological validity of these principles for co-existence in multi-religious societies.

3. Research Methodology

The current research uses a qualitative approach to study this phenomenon in depth (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). The study intends to explore and analyze the principles of religious pluralism for interfaith tolerance and co-existence, as expounded by Muslim perennial philosophers in their writings. The dialectical relational approach (Fairclough 1995) advanced by Norman Fairclough underpins this critical study.

Fairclough's dialectical relational approach provides the possibility of and a model for investigating the principles of perennial philosophy for interfaith relations, and for exploring the concerns and issues of Muslim perennialist discourse surrounding religious pluralism and its social practices in context of interfaith tolerance.

Writings of the late twentieth century and of twenty-first-century Muslim perennialists were selected for this analysis of the theological implications of religious pluralism.

4. Discussion

4.1. Principles of Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism means the existence of people of different faiths living together in peace and accepting the differences in religious beliefs and opinions in a multi-religious society. Perennialists reject exclusivist theological claims and provide principles for religious pluralism for interfaith relations, tolerance, and co-existence. Several of these principles are worth mentioning here.

4.1.1. An Exposition of Perennialists' Metaphysical Principles: Metaphysical Oneness and Relative Absolutism

The central idea of the perennial philosophy of religious pluralism is based on metaphysical intuition; it is intuited directly, through divine intellect. Perennial philosophers emphasize that an ontological metaphysical principle exists in every created being, and that this metaphysical principal is unlimited and cannot be limited to any system (Guénon 1974).

Guénon contends that metaphysics is “essentially the knowledge of the Universal” (Guénon 2002), which he further elucidates as “knowledge of principles belonging to the universal order” (Ibid., P. 71). Guénon’s work can be viewed as a recognizable proof of the all-inclusive principals that exist inside the universe of form and manifestation. Affirmation of this contention can be found elsewhere, especially in the Hindu tradition, but also in Taoism and Buddhism, just as in the more internal and esoteric elements of Christianity and Islam. Here, legends, customs, images, and the rhythms of nature are considered to be “signs” of a higher request for information, or as echoes of heavenly thoughts that, in themselves, are beyond structure and words. As Guénon states:

Metaphysics, because it opens out a limitless vista of possibilities, must take care never to lose sight of the inexpressible, which indeed constitutes its very essence. (Ibid)

The metaphysical focus varies from one tradition to another. Buddhism, for example, is in general a spiritual practice, but one which requires essentially metaphysical doctrines; meanwhile, Hinduism is, in the first place, a metaphysics, but one that implies, under the same necessity, a spiritual practice. “There is no science of the soul” (Schuon 2009b, p. 14), says Schuon, “without a metaphysical basis to it and without spiritual remedies at its disposal” (Ibid)). The connection between theology and metaphysics is that of exoterism to esoterism. Exoterism is “unable of being conscious of the relationship which, at one and the same time, justifies it and yet limits it” (Schuon 2003, p. 49).

4.1.2. Esoterism and Exoterism as Keys to Formal Diversity and Transcendent Unity

Muslim perennialists’ vocation is to reveal and expound the Transcendent unity and universality of the great religious traditions, while also explaining their necessary diversity and formal divergence. They are also concerned with preserving the particular religious forms that guarantee the integrity of the various traditions and vouchsafe their spiritual efficacy. Perennialists explain this distinction in this way:

It is some of the time affirmed that all religions are similarly valid. Be that as it may, this would appear to be just messy deduction, since the different religions hold perspectives on reality which are forcefully unique if not conflicting. (Thomas 1969)

In concise terms, the transcendent unity of religions has two aims: first, to nurture the formal comprehension of each religion in all its diversity, and, second, the understanding of the esoteric and spiritual aspects of this religion.

Exoterism consists in identifying transcendent realities with dogmatic forms, and if need be, with the historical facts of a given revelation, whereas esoterism refers in a more or less direct manner to these same realities. (Schuon 2009a)

Esoterism seeks the apprehension of reality as such, not reality as understood from a particular perspective and “under the veil of different religious formulations” (Schuon 2019, p. 37). While exoterism perceives “essence” or “universal truth” as a function of particular forms, esoterism sees the forms as a function of “essence” (Ibid).

The esoteric and exoteric dimensions of religion sustain inner unity and outer multiplicity, which perennialists call formal diversity; transcendent unity and the objective is “To see beyond the veil of multiplicity . . . that unity which is origin of all scared forms” (Nasr 2007, p. 18) to discover the “truth which shines forth within each authentic religious universe manifesting the Absolute” (Ibid).

Far from demonstrating the wrongness of a considerable number of precepts concerning the powerful, the diversity of religion appears in fact to support the formal character of disclosure and the conventional character of customary human comprehension: the quintessence of disclosure or edification is one aspect, yet human instinct requires diversity (Schuon 1969).

Perennialists recall Junayd's maxim to explain the need for diversity and to explain the fact that humanity is ramified into different branches:

The color of the water is the color of the vessel containing it Or, if a more abstract formulation be preferred, this from Aquinas: The thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower. (Pallis 2010, p. 157)

At the current crossroads, the perennialist standpoint adopts the main goals of the proper diversity (with the inescapable oppositions that it entails) and the inward solidarity of various traditions. Tierno Bokar, the twentieth century Black Muslim, holy person from Mali, also affirms the concept of formal diversity and transcendent unity:

The rainbow owes its excellence to the diversity of its shades and hues. Similarly, we consider the voices of different devotees that ascent up from all pieces of the earth as an orchestra of gestures of recognition tending to God, who alone can be Unique. (Bâ 2007)

Muslim perennialists assert that the truth that illuminates every religious tradition is one, and that the "truth sufficient unto salvation" (Smith 2000, p. x), which is the basic truth conveyed by all of these various structures, should not block subjective discriminations concerning specific parts of one tradition or another.

4.1.3. Metaphysical Oneness and the Relative Absolute

Perennialism is a spiritual outlook on all religions; it asserts that all religions have one basic metaphysical and philosophical truth, and they all originate from one truth. Lings develops this idea of 'one truth', and states that this truth has been expressed over the course of history in different ways, by different methods, and with different types of knowledge. This idea agrees with 'Universalism', positing that every religion may appear different on the surface, but they are all based on same idea of spirituality and their core values are same.

Perennialists advise that 'One Truth' has multiple outlets, and that the religion one follows is not the only one that provides spiritual sustenance to human beings; there are others that allow for and follow the same universal path of one truth. Perennial traditionalist refer to the relative absolute belief that each religion derives from the absolute, but is relative in its religious forms. "The unity of Religion is to be found first and foremost in this absolute which is at once Truth and Reality and the origin of all revelations and of all truth" (Nasr 1989). Schuon précises this concept: "Revelation is absolute in itself, but relative in its form" (Schuon 2006, p. 26). There are two general factors here, i.e., relative and absolute. The relative is an element that is situated with reference to its normal standard position, whereas the absolute is the original fixed demand. Perennialists state that the demands of a religion are absolute as they are derived from divine prudence, whereas guarantees are relative, as they are understood from a human vantage point. The value and effectiveness of one religion as compared to other religions must be considered as something of a 'half-truth', and not the absolute truth.

On the exoteric level, truth claims are different from each other, but on the esoteric level they do not present irreconcilable contradictions. Schuon further clarifies this idea:

"Our starting point is the acknowledgement of the fact that there are diverse religions which exclude each other. This could mean that one religion is right and that all others are false; it could mean also that all are false. In reality, it means that all are right, not in their dogmatic exclusivism, but in their unanimous inner signification, which coincide with pure metaphysics or, in other terms, with the *Philosophia Perennis*." (Schuon 1993, p. xiii)

Lings goes on to explain and reflect upon the boundaries of Muslim doctrine, noting that it was the last religion that was introduced, that it sums up the teachings of other religions, and that it is flexible enough to give space to what is not specified in it. Lings alludes to the Holy verses of the Qur'ān, and makes a direct excerpt from it addressed to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH):

“Surely, those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians—whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, and acts righteously, shall have no fear, nor shall such people grieve.”¹ (Al Qur'ān, 5:69)

Nasr accepts that the plurality of religions cannot be found in the outward elements of religions; the solidarity of religions is a supernatural solidarity that is well beyond superficial signs (Nasr 1993). Moreover, Nasr urges individuals of all beliefs to rehearse their conventions all the more completely. Nasr writes:

The solidarity of religions is to be discovered as a matter of first importance right now is without a moment's delay Truth and Reality and the origin of Revelations and of all Truth. When the sufi claims that the doctrine of unity is unique (al-tawhidu wahid), they are asserting this fundamental but often forgotten principle. Only at the level of Absolute are the teachings of the religions the same . . . The different religions are like so many languages speaking of that unique Truth . . . Yet, because each religion comes from Truth . . . and reduced to insignificance in the name of some kind of abstract universality. (Nasr 1989, p. 293)

4.1.4. Authority and the Universality of Tradition

Perennial philosophers describe tradition as a perennial philosophy that is eternal, universal, and immutable (Ibid., p. 74). Tradition in its purest metaphysical sense is one and the same timeless wisdom that can be found in all the sacred scriptures, and which underpins all religious traditions (Oldmeadow 2010). Traditionalists argue that perennial wisdom can accommodate the diversity of religions without upsetting the faithful. It is able to construct a framework in which a multi-cultural and multi-religious community could be united without dismissing local values. It is also able to construct the power of religious 'formalism', i.e., dogmatism, claiming that the absolute alone is absolute, and, beyond that, everything is a relative absolute. It can create a religious tolerance through dialogue and intellectual exchanges between traditional religions, since it sees all traditional religions as different paths that lead to the same summit. As indicated by perennial traditionalists, individuals who acknowledge the traditionalist position can procure a richer harvest.

The notion that Muhammad (PBUH) was sent for all prompts us to question whether divine reality (God) really wanted Islam to be the ultimate global religion. Moreover, if this is true, why are there invincible obstacles in its path? To answer this question, Lings quotes from the Holy Qur'ān:

“We have sent down to you the Book with truth, confirming the Book before it, and a protector for it. So, judge between them according to what Allah has sent down, and do not follow their desires against the truth that has come to you. For each of you We have made a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made a single community of people, but (He did not), so that He may test you in what He has given to you. Strive, then, to excel each other in good deeds. To Allah is the return for all of you. Then Allah shall tell you about that in which you disputed.” (Al Qur'ān, 5:48)

Lings explains that this is an excerpt from the last holy verses, in which God describes perfecting and completing the religion, and also confirms that, if Allah had willed it, all would have turned to Islam. Here, Allah asserts that there are still followers of other religions in the world, and humans would turn to Islam to absolve their spiritual turmoil and predicaments.

In conclusion, perennialists adopt a pluralistic position on metaphysical principles including metaphysical oneness and relative absolute, the transcendent unity of religions,

the universality of tradition to religions, and the need for peaceful co-existence. They are conscious of the fact that all religions are correct in their dogmatic exclusivism and possess unanimous inward meaning, which coincides with pure metaphysics, denoting the wholeness of the primordial and universal truths of Religio Perennis. This term designates the essence of every form of worship, prayer, and morality system, just as the Sophia Perennis is the crux of all dogmas and all expressions of wisdom. The core concept of perennial philosophy is the reaffirmation of religious pluralism and the rejection of any one tradition's claim of truth, but there are some misgivings and reservations in perennialist principles of religious pluralism for peaceful co-existence. The following section offers a critique of the theological implication of the perennialist principle of religious pluralism.

4.2. *An Evaluation of Perennialist Principles of Religious Pluralism*

The Muslim perennialist perspective provides a number of principles that support religious pluralism and seems to accommodate different religious perspectives. However, there are problematic dimensions that raise questions about its tenability. This section offers an academic critique of the perspective of Muslim perennialists on religious pluralism.

4.2.1. *Evaluation of Metaphysical Oneness and the Relative Absolute*

Perennial philosophy in its present form evolved from the idea of one truth, which first came into being in the early years of the nineteenth century. At that time, this idea was advanced by transcendentalists, and it was then transformed into the Unitarian position. As the nineteenth century neared its end, the idea of one truth was propagated by a U.S.-based organization, the Theosophical Society (1875). As this organization was based in the U.S., they played a key role in spreading this perennial philosophy throughout the western world. This philosophy developed into the more complex and widespread philosophies of Neo-Hinduism or Neo Vedanta, as named by Paul Hacker in the twentieth century (Vijayarangam 2017).

To address the conflicting truth claims between world religions, perennial philosophers advance the concept of the "Relative Absolute": there is one absolute truth, but many relative absolutes in each of the great religious traditions, which exist independently, yet side by side. Using the term 'relative absolute', perennial philosophers contend that the similarities between the religions of Islam and Christianity are uncanny, as both are Holy religions with scriptures from God. However, fundamental differences between these two religions continue to exist.

The basic difference is that Christians consider Christ to be part of the Holy Trinity and the son of God, whereas, in Islam, Christ is a prophet.

The concept of the Trinity can also be taken as relative, as Muslims have strong faith in the absolute and singular nature of God. Christians, meanwhile, believe the opposite; as such, there is no middle way to interpret this belief for both religions. Therefore, for Muslim perennialists, absolute truth claims, such as "God is one", or "God is Triune", are true only within their own specific worlds. However, there is a significant problem with this conflicting truth claim, as the Quran explicitly proclaims the message of Tauheed (Oneness of Allah) for humanity and contradicts the concept of the Trinity:

"Surely, disbelievers are those who say, "Allah is the third of the three" while there is no god but One God. If they do not desist from what they say, a painful punishment shall certainly befall such disbelievers." (Al Qur'ān 5:73)

The practical implications of the term 'relative absolute' are ambiguous. If the Qur'ān is relatively absolute, according to the terms of relativity, does this permit Muslims to consider some of the rules of the Qur'ān, such as capital punishment or the prohibition of alcohol, as relative, meaning that only particular rules are relevant in the historical context of that particular community?

As is the case for its practical implications, the metaphysical implications of the term "relative absolute" are also ambiguous, because the dispute between Christians and Muslims on the issue of the Trinity cannot be settled by the assertion of such a concept. If

God is truly one and does not accept any other forms or associates, as Muslims claim, the doctrine of the Trinity is not true. If one is correct, the other is wrong; it is difficult to find the meeting point between them.

4.2.2. Glitches with Esoterism and Exoterism and the Universality of Tradition

Perennialists believe that these religious disagreements exist only on an exoteric level. Meanwhile, esoterically, all differences are harmonized, and the contradictory becomes complimentary. However, this harmonization is vague, and it seems that it will never be apparent on our common level of ratiocination (Sharma 2008). The fundamental unity of different religious traditions is a revelation that can only be achieved by the intuitive mind, and it is perhaps beyond description. However, on a religious or philosophical level, we are shackled by an unenlightened relativism. As Adnan Aslam states:

The Perennialist account cannot offer any solution to the doctrinal and ethical conflicts of Religions, since it wants to hold as true every sacred formulation of Tradition. If every traditional doctrine of a given religion is venerated, how could the Perennial philosophy possibly reconcile the resultant conflict? (Aslan 1994, pp. 128–29)

It can therefore be said that perennialism uses the distinction between esoteric and exoteric to solve the conflicts in multi religious societies. Instead of emphasizing the internal tension of each between the esoteric and exoteric dimensions, perennialists attempt to harmonize each tradition with the others. In other words, this is a strategy of displacement used to solve religious conflicts, and it is ultimately problematic.

Pluralists bypass significant contradictions so as to overlook inconsistencies. Pluralism competes with Islamic education because Islam presents itself as the final and complete religion for humanity, not as a culture-bound religion, whereas pluralism sees the differences between Islam and diverse traditions as the result of societal errors. Islam offers a fundamentally liberated social vision; on the other hand, traditionalist social contrasts are rooted in the standing framework as indications of the varied nature of being.

The triumph of the traditional outlook relies on the utter transformation of culture, which perennial philosophy alone is unable to achieve, and it is highly impractical to imagine that the procedure of secularization would be reversed to sanctify culture. Perennialists believe that perennial philosophy is universal, and they communicate this universality primarily through Islamic texts. However, it is difficult to refer to their writings as an 'Islamic theology of religions' because the foundation of their expositions is metaphysical and thus universal.

4.3. *Qur'ānic Principles of Religious Pluralism*

There are several verses in the Qur'ān that outline the concept of pluralism and diversity, and also provide principles for interfaith relations. Some of the basic Qur'ānic principles are as follows.

Religious diversity is affirmed in God's revelation, as the Qur'ān states that the undeniable fact of religious diversity is part of the hierarchy that God envisaged while creating human beings. Humans were created as pairs, i.e., male–female (Al Qur'ān 49:13; 53:45), and they vary in terms of skin color, language (Al Qur'ān 30:23.), beliefs (Al Qur'ān 64:2), and social ranks (Al Qur'ān 6:165). The association of varied and differentiated groups is the social aspect of human relationships and is at the foundation of the vision of civilization.

The Qur'ān also demonstrates God's mercy and glory through a multiplicity of races and colors, and different communities and religions. The Qur'ān states:

"O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Aware." (Al Qur'ān 49:13)

The Qur'ān does not require a special religious affiliation for the respect and inviolability of human dignity. More importantly, the Qur'ān defines the respect for human dignity as a natural right and a universal value. Of course, the *Qur'ānic* attitude towards human dignity can be borne out in a variety of ways. However, it seems that one of the most central aspects for exploring such an attitude is the genesis of man and, more particularly, his creation as well as his status among the other creatures. The *Qur'ānic* attitude towards human dignity is also made manifest in the high status that human beings enjoy among the rest of God's creatures. In this respect, the *Qur'ān* says:

“And We have certainly honored the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference.” (Al Qur'ān 17:70)

Common humanity is the foremost meeting point of human beings with 'Others'. As is well known, there have always been both believers and non-believers in the world. In the light of our knowledge of the religious history of humankind, we can say that there cannot be any time in which all people are either believers or unbelievers. Because of this undeniable fact, if people want to live with others in harmony and peace, they need to be respectful to them as human beings, without taking into account whether they are believers and unbelievers.

The principle of reciprocity should be a main criterion through which Muslims determine their attitudes towards others.

“Allah does not forbid you as regards those who did not fight you on account of faith, and did not expel you from your homes, that you do good to them, and deal justly with them. Surely Allah loves those who maintain justice.”

“Allah only forbids you from those who fight you because of religion and expel you from your homes and aid in your expulsion—[forbids] that you make allies of them. And whoever makes allies of them, then it is those who are the wrongdoers.” (Al Qur'ān 60:8–9)

The Qur'ān urges Muslims to determine their attitudes towards others with regard to the others' attitudes towards them. According to the principle of reciprocity, Muslims should treat others as they themselves are treated. In short, the Qur'ān explicitly calls Muslims to adopt a “dialogical world view”.

The Qur'ān, far from eliminating the differences between various religious traditions, invites people to connect with each other through mutual understanding and mutual discussion. Furthermore, the Qur'ān commands Muslims to regard the diversity of ways of life and cultures as a way of building peace and harmony between different communities. As we have pointed out above, diversity is not meant to bring about the clash of civilizations, but rather an alliance of civilizations.

Conflict and disagreement are inevitable among different communities because of the diversity and plurality of religious beliefs, cultures, and ethnic identities. The Qur'ān invites Muslims to argue with those people with whom they disagree, not in enmity, but in the kindest manner, in order to establish a dialogical environment in which both sides can live in mutual respect and mutual understanding.

Moreover, everybody has the freedom to choose whatever faiths s/he wants, or else not to choose any faith:

“There is no compulsion in Faith. The correct way has become distinct from the erroneous. Now, whoever rejects the Tāghūt (the Rebel, the Satan) and believes in Allah has a firm grasp on the strongest ring that never breaks. Allah is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.” (Al Qur'ān 2:256)

In their relationships with others, Muslims are reminded in the Qur'ān that nobody can be forced or put under pressure to choose a religion. It seems that this Qur'ānic principle is the clearest expression of the philosophy of modern democracy concerning the freedom of religion and conscience. According to this Qur'ānic principle, nobody can be forced to choose a religion or can be put under pressure because of his/her faith.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to analyze the perennial traditionalist discourse in relation to religious pluralism and peaceful co-existence in multi-religious societies. From the analysis carried out, it can be observed that the kind of religious pluralism advocated by perennial philosophers is one that it inherits from Theosophy.

These are the key principles of Muslim perennialists in regard to the solidarity of religions:

- (1) All of the significant religions have a divine source;
- (2) Exclusively, they are equivalent, but they are exoterically unique;
- (3) Traces of original perennial wisdom are found in the roots of every religious tradition, and perennial wisdom can accommodate the diversity of religions in order to unite multicultural and multi-religious societies.

For reasons already discussed at some length, the perennialist attempt to resolve the problem of religious pluralism is quite unconvincing; this response is a symptom of the confusion of the times, rather than an answer to it. Consequently, the principles of religious pluralism endorsed by Muslim perennial traditionalist for interfaith tolerance are irreconcilable and thus inherently divisive; religious pluralism reduced to that particular level becomes unmanageable. Perennialists use custom and the scholarly instinct of the standards of Sophia wisdom as their criteria of assessment, rather than the standards of Islam.

We cannot ignore the threat of violence in diverse societies due to religious intolerance. Religious tolerance is achievable only when men learn to respect thought-out yet mistaken religious beliefs. We must learn to recognize and accept the tolerance that Islam demands.

In this regard, focusing on the terrestrial dimensions and implications of religious diversity, particularly normative religious pluralism, may be the best approach, in that it might “leave the question of salvation open, rather than to choose between mutually exclusive beliefs” (Traer 1999, p. 9).

Moreover, Islam does not violate earlier religions; rather, it confirms them all. What Islam shatters are the false notions and beliefs that arise in other religions due to corruption, deviation, or the temporal limitations of their validity:

“Instead, We launch the truth against falsehood, which gets it smashed, and in no time it is gone. Alas to you for what you describe!” (Al Qur’ān 21:18)

The willingness to accept genuine disagreement, not the eradication or relativization of disagreement, is the key to effective dialogue among religions. For Muslims, the submission to the will of God is the most effective remedy and, of course, it is part and parcel of Islam itself:

“Say, “O people of the Book, come to a word common between us and between you, that we worship none but Allah, that we associate nothing with Him and that some of us do not take others as Lords instead of Allah.” Then, should they turn back, say, “Bear witness that we are Muslims.” (Al Qur’ān 3:64)

In fact, Islam took the first step towards the unification of human, and this Qur’anic principle serves as an invitation. Peaceful co-existence, patience, and forgiveness are traits that can only be found in a society instituted on the principle of respect for humankind.

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- ¹ For the translation of Quranic verses see Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani, *The meaning of the Noble Quran*. Karachi: Maktaba Ma'ariful Quran.

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