Achieving Civic Pluralism
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Dr. E. Glenn Hinson, one of my theological mentors, emailed me a number of years ago saying, "The future of humankind depends on a very different attitude toward other faiths than we have shown in the past." Hinson's challenge for the wellbeing of humankind constitutes a call to build *respect*, *relationships*, and *cooperation for the common good* across lines of religious difference. These crucial elements – respect, relationships, and cooperation – comprise the way that [Interfaith America](), founded by Eboo Patel, describes religious pluralism. Used this way, pluralism is not simple diversity or a particular theological perspective about similarities or differences among religions. It is, rather, the *accomplishment* of these three elements across lines of religious difference. Diana Eck at Harvard Divinity School and founder of [The Pluralism Project](), likewise, sees pluralism as this kind of achievement.

In 2016, I wrote an article for TIO entitled "[Unpacking Pluralism]()." My intention in that piece was to disentangle different uses of "pluralism" because these divergent uses seemed to lead to confusion. In that article, I analyzed [Eck's use of pluralism]() in contrast with [John Hick's]() usage that centers on the "Real." Hick claimed that the Real characterizes the ultimacy represented in most religions. The Real, per Kantian thinking, is a thing-in-itself that cannot be sensed directly, but only perceived through external phenomena. Hick used Kant's thing-in-itself vis-à-vis interpretations of manifesting phenomena to explain why religions, though all derived from the Real, are so different. Due to the fact that we cannot perceive the thing-in-itself, the Real is encountered and interpreted differently in different traditions. Thus Hick's thinking, though more nuanced and complex, is comparable to the metaphor describing different religions

as paths up different sides of a mountain, but all meet at the peak. Whether one agrees with Hick or not, interlocutors need to be keenly aware of their use of the term pluralism in specific contexts.

This reality came home to me when I was working to increase interfaith work on the campus where I teach. A colleague criticized my efforts to support pluralism. Eventually we realized that he, a philosopher, was using Hick's version of the term and I was using Eck's. When I explained Eck and Patel's takes on pluralism, he became supportive of our interfaith efforts.

Civic Pluralism: A Practical Approach to Religious Diversity

In _Christians and Religious Pluralism_ (1982), [Alan Race](#) described exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. These categories have been further [divided to account for nuance](#). Additionally, newer taxonomies have been developed. Each of these nuances and taxonomies are helpful in their own way, particularly for religious scholars. But for efficient communication among non-specialists and diverse groups of people, I find Race's terms, with my modifications described below, to be the most user-friendly.

In my courses such as Religions of the World, Interfaith Leadership, and Dialogue with the Other, as well as my work with related campus programs and our city's local interfaith council, I have expanded the taxonomy as follows: Exclusivism, Inclusivism, _Theological_ Pluralism (e.g. Hick, et al.), and _Civic_ Pluralism (Eck, Patel, et al.). Although Eck and Patel typically use "pluralism" alone, without the modifier, the intent of "civic" is inherent in their definitions. I begin with civic pluralism because it supports each of the other attitudes toward religious diversity as will become clear below.

Civic pluralism represents the achievement of interfaith respect, relationships, and cooperation for the common good previously discussed. Honoring people with diverse views, while simultaneously maintaining one's own commitments and beliefs, is inherent in respect and in civic pluralism. This is not about syncretizing or watering-down one's own tradition. One can be an exclusivist, inclusivist, theological pluralist, or hold other philosophical/theological positions *and still be a civic pluralist*. To oversimplify slightly, civic pluralism is about being a good neighbor and behaving in neighborly ways, regardless of religious similarities or differences with one's neighbor. Stated differently, civic pluralism means building bridges across lines of religious difference.

Exclusivism is the position that "my religion is true and others are false" or "salvation is through my religion alone." One's first intuition, understandably, could be that an exclusivist would not and could not be involved in interfaith efforts. While this intuition is largely accurate in my experience, a compassionate exclusivist could also be a civic pluralist. I say this with some caution because it would be harmful if the exclusivist were motivated to proselytize. A board member on our interfaith council was contacted by someone who wanted to get involved to do just that. Of course, the board member said no. But there are exclusivists with pure intentions who can work as civic pluralists.

Inclusivism is the view that "truth and salvation are centered in my religion, but may be discovered or experienced by persons practicing other religions." Simply because truth is found in an "unexpected" place does not make it untrue. To be precise, inclusivism does not imply that one is saved through the path of another faith. Rather, in the case of Christian inclusivism, for example, Christ is present to people in other traditions and these people may respond to Christ even if they are not aware that this is the case. This perspective is prevalent in post Vatican II

Roman Catholicism. Nostra Aetate, a Vatican II proclamation issued by Pope Paul VI, is probably the most cogent expression of inclusivism available. Catholic theologian Karl Rahner incorporated soteriology into the inclusivist perspective with his concept of the "anonymous Christian." Rahner's perspective has been broadly criticized within and outside the Catholic Church. Roman Catholics who are not pleased with Vatican II have been especially critical, asserting that salvation is only within the faith. Others, inside and outside of Christianity, object that referring to a human being who is not Christian as an "anonymous Christian" is paternalizing and offensive. Yet, as with exclusivism, one can be an inclusivist and also be a civic pluralist.

Theological pluralism typically asserts something similar to, though not necessarily identical with, that which is attributed to Hick, above. Others who have held comparable views are Huston Smith, Frithjof Schuon, Swami Vivekananda, and more. For the sake of brevity and simplicity, I am using Hick as a representative throughout this article. Despite critiques of theological pluralism, the most articulate of which may be Stephen Prothero's book *God is not One*, I have encountered many *theological* pluralists who are involved in interfaith work and have genuinely honorable intentions and practices. The intent of this article is not to be critical of theological pluralists, per se. I will, however, point out one positive and one negative aspect of the notion. The following are pragmatic assessments, not theological or philosophical evaluations. On the positive side, theological pluralists are some of the most devoted activists in interfaith work. One wonders if interfaith work would be gutted if all the theological pluralists quit. Negatively, there seems to be a false assumption on the part of some (many?) inside and outside of interfaith activity that one *has* to be a theological pluralist in order to be involved.

They probably do not use the term, but the concept of one mountain with one peak is pervasive. Unfortunately, genuine differences may get minimized or erased as explained below.

A Foundation for Interfaith Efforts?

Our local interfaith council invited representatives of a more well-established organization in a larger city to give a presentation on their work at one of our meetings. The presentation was fantastic. We gleaned ideas that will help our much smaller program. But the logo on their PowerPoint slides was a tree with a large trunk and many branches. They explained that the trunk represents God and the branches are the different religions. They did not realize that this logo was disturbingly Abrahamic-centric, exclusive, and an inaccurate representation of some of the religions they wanted to include and affirm. I thought of the Pagan and agnostic seated at my table and my Humanist friend sitting a few tables away. I thought of Buddhists, some Hindus, and more. I thought of exclusivists and inclusivists who are also civic pluralists, but definitely not theological pluralists. Fortunately, no one was offended (as far as we know) and it gave our board of directors an opportunity, privately, to discuss the problematic nature of the logo. My point is absolutely *not* to dismiss theological pluralists. This is their faith perspective and they have a right to hold it. My point, however, is that theological pluralism *is not an effective overall theology or philosophy to undergird or symbolize interfaith councils or other interfaith initiatives*. For this, we need civic pluralism.

Conclusion

The proposals and ideas presented herein, especially with reference to civic pluralism, were bubbling in the back of my head when I wrote the 2016 article but, at that time, I had not discerned the language to articulate what I really wanted to say. The *work* of civic pluralism was clear to me, but I had not yet thought of adding the simple modifier "civic" to distinguish it from

theological pluralism and continued to get frustrated that well-meaning people would conflate the two concepts. This modifier has helped me to express interfaith aspirations in more lucid and inclusive ways. I suggest we drop the singular use of the term pluralism and express what we really mean, whether that is theological pluralism or civic pluralism. More importantly, for the sake of interfaith dialogue, understanding, and cooperation, I want to issue a call to ground our interfaith work in civic pluralism.