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Kenneth Rose, *Pluralism: The Future of Religion*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, x + 190 pp., \$110.00 US (hbk) / \$39.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781628925265.

Pluralism is seemingly everywhere in the twenty-first century. Various defined as political, legal, and/or religious, it represents a powerful ideal that seeks to answer the question of how to get along in a world marked by competing forms of difference. Broadly understood, pluralism conveys a commitment to recognizing, understanding, and living with others who are not like ourselves. In this sense, it is a regulatory concept that issues norms for acceptable identity and behavior, creating new possibilities for social engagement and curtailing others. Embedded in a wide range of institutions, whether civic, religious, or otherwise, pluralism is never neutral in its prescriptions. Public and academic discussions of its significance, therefore, are often accompanied by a spate of concerns regarding changing moral, political, and religious authorities. And, as with all such concepts, it has both its critics and its champions.

As the subtitle of his book suggests, Kenneth Rose is a champion of religious pluralism. Indeed, he goes so far as to contend that “pluralism will always be the future of religion” (162). Rose confesses his optimism will sound strange to postmodern readers, yet he stands as a true believer in the power of history despite the atrocities of the twentieth century (1). In his view, neither humanity nor any of its artifacts can resist the tireless forces of change. The cultural-linguistic shifts that accompany the flowing of time guarantee no form of religion can long endure in its present state, thus undercutting all dogmatic pretensions to universal normativity. So “since no verbal formulas, as products of history and specific contexts and communities, can be final or normative, religious pluralism should be the default stance of responsible religious thought” (2). Rose insists religious pluralism is a necessary principle of time-bound existence, one grounded in the very structure of human contingency (68).

Hence *Pluralism* seeks to propel Rose’s chosen field of study, the theology of religions, beyond its present antipluralist impasse. This discipline, which he believes was once boldly moving toward pluralism, now finds itself gridlocked by particularism (25). Inclusivist and exclusivist theologies of religions dominate the debates in the subject, with their proponents insisting that pluralist interpretations of religious diversity are nothing more than covert attempts at religious imperialism. Rather than sponsoring pluralist positions, therefore, scholars working in the theology of religions largely advocate for theological particularisms centered upon tradition-specific beliefs (4). Unfortunately for Rose, these particularisms have become the basis for all philosophical and theological reflection upon the significance of religious diversity undertaken in the field. And, we are told, all this has led scholars to

refuse to generalize about religions or to engage in second-order theorizing and criticism of religious phenomena, resulting in the production of a sterile discourse which contributes nothing to humanity's understanding of itself as *homo religiosus* (15, 35, 67).

Rose charts a path out of this quagmire by means of his twin concepts of apophatic pluralism and deparicularization. Rooted in his belief in the inevitability of change and decay, these concepts provide him with the tools necessary for challenging particularistic hegemony in the theology of religions. Apophatic pluralism is, in short, a negation of the ultimacy of all truth claims based on the inability of speech to capture the essence of reality (81). Not itself a substantive position, Rose insists it is rather a practice that reveals the myriad ways religions construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct themselves through the rise of new forms predicated upon change. And he maintains this practice entails openness to all systems of religiosity insofar as they are understood as finite attempts to make sense of the sacred dimension of life (15, 139). If one practices apophatic pluralism, he or she is necessarily a religious pluralist.

“Deparicularization” is Rose’s term for the process whereby every religious tradition unravels itself as it adapts to the changes foisted upon it by time. Derived from the categorical law of change, Rose insists this process is an unavoidable element of the history of religions (9-10). Deparicularization thus can be seen as the datum that proves the principle of apophatic pluralism. How so? It dethrones absolutist pretensions in its subjection of all religious forms to erosion. This process therefore ensures securing universal assent for any finite body of religious teaching is an impossible task. In view of deparicularization, then, it is better for scholars and believers alike to acknowledge that religious language can never exhaust the possibilities promised by experience than it is for them to cling to particular teachings as normative for all humanity (5, 10, 161). The simple fact of change demands that all become pluralists.

Rose holds that only those who refuse to recognize the fundamental shape of reality will contest this claim. While he takes aim at all forms of religious particularism in this book, Rose possesses a unique distaste for theological inclusivists, whom he accuses of advocating a position that “cannot be the basis for responsible reflection about the world’s religious tradition [sic]” (26). This position is marked by a false discursive openness that conceals the operative idea that one of humanity’s many religions must contain the final and normative truth for all people at all times. Rose sees inclusivists, not pluralists, as the ones advocating a covertly imperialist agenda. In his eyes, inclusivism is merely a smokescreen for conceptual maneuvering that is meant to serve as a doorway for outsiders into the inclusivist’s own tradition. And it does not help their case that inclusivists in the theology of religions are almost unilaterally Christian thinkers who tend to subject all other religious traditions to evaluation along the lines of the theological norms of Christianity while declaring that they make no such move (45). Chapters 2 and 3 are thus devoted to a survey and critique of inclusivist theologies of religion.

Pluralism’s critique of inclusivism is perceptive, if a bit misguided. The inclusivist tendency to define other religious traditions without allowing itself to be defined by them certainly does not equate to a genuine respect for religious difference. And when paired to its oft-found alliance with orthodox Christian theology, it is easy to see how mainstream inclusivism in the theology of religions participates in the orientalizing discourses of religion that scholars like Gil Anidjar, Daniel Colucciello Barber, and Tomoko Masuzawa have identified as still operative in the modern West. It is unfortunate, therefore, that Rose opts not to pursue this avenue of thought further, choosing instead to lambast inclusivists for their basic refusal to recognize the contingent and historically-located nature of religious

language (65-66, 69). Rather than lead with significant questions of ethics in interreligious theological argumentation, Rose grounds his critique of inclusivism in the empirical reality of change.

While I have no quibble with the claim that (Christian) theological inclusivisms flounder as responsible ways of engaging the world's many and varied religious traditions, Rose's single-minded insistence that change inevitably requires all persons to become religious pluralists fails to persuade for two reasons.

First and most simply, Rose has little awareness that his governing concepts are themselves products of particular times and places. If he does have such awareness, then it appears he believes his position to be utterly incontrovertible, rooted as it is in change (146-147). Yet, as was mentioned before, pluralism is itself a concept embedded in a range of institutions—some of which, for example, teach us to read empirical realities as indicative of philosophical truths—and so is always wrapped up in questions of power. Hence no concept of pluralism can ever be considered self-evident or naturally occurring, but must be understood to have its own unique genealogical emergence. Pluralism can never be, as Rose would have us think, an *a priori* truth. I would have liked to see an admission of this sort, for I believe it is this very recognition that enables the dialogue this book so passionately pursues. Unfortunately, Rose's unqualified commitment to the veracity of his concepts blinds him to his own discursive imperialisms. This is illustrated clearly in Chapters 5 and 6, where he reads from the Upanishads and the New Testament and comes away insisting that they promote his vision of apophatic pluralism despite much evidence to the contrary (127-130). While he is right to recognize the multiplicity of voices present in sacred texts, it is conspicuous that Rose can read such different scriptures and gain the same insight from each. Certainly many of those to whom these holy books belong will contest his self-authorized interpretive practices.

Second, it does not logically follow, as Rose repeatedly insists it does, that recognition of the finite nature of religious speech necessitates a commitment to pluralism (see especially Chapter 7, "The Parable of the Prisoners," for this argument). It is possible to imagine, for instance, a religious community that teaches that its language is simultaneously limited and subject to change and yet affirms that its dogmatic precepts are normative for all persons everywhere. Indeed, many doctrine-heavy religious communities have taught this very claim. Thus the law of change does not support pluralism as a prescriptive view, and Rose's concepts are unable to perform the theoretical work he wants them to do. While it might lead to a peculiar relationship with religious speech, the observation that religions necessarily shift over time does not provide sufficient grounds to argue for a normative theological pluralism.

There is one other point of issue I want to raise in this review. The notable absence of Islamic thinkers from this otherwise widely-sourced text suggests that Rose's pluralistic future is not quite as expansive as he would like us to believe. I am not asserting that Rose intentionally excludes Islam from his thought, nor that he in any sense is possessed of an antagonism against it. The point is rather that his vision of pluralism—like many of the pluralisms on offer today—authorizes the inclusion of some religious traditions into its imagined future while forbidding others—even those he intends to include.

Rose would therefore do well to examine on what grounds religious difference has been constructed as the sort of problem in the theology of religions that potentially has pluralism as its solution. This sort of investigation would reveal much; not least the fact that far more relevant to the aim of realizing an institutionalized pluralism than contending for a normative philosophical commitment would be an interrogation of why forms of religious

particularism operate after the insidious fashion that they do. What causes them to become entrenched in conceptual and political parochialisms? To incite violence? Consider, for example, the work of Saba Mahmood, who in her recent *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*¹ insists on uncovering the mechanisms of political secularism and revealing how they facilitate religious conflict along the very lines upon which they promise to erase it. As long as secularism continues to draw distinctions between religious minorities and majorities in its quest to ensure a sort of pluralistic freedom of religion, Mahmood teaches us, it will also fertilize the tensions that are attendant to such divisions. And while Mahmood's vision is not immediately translatable into the dominant categories of the theology of religions, it seems to me that work like hers stands a much greater chance than this of achieving pluralism as the future of religion.

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¹ Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

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