Critical Rationalism or Relativism

Q. What’s the epistemological basis of the religious pluralism you have in mind? Specifically, is it rationality and critical realism or relativism? In other words, based on a simplified classification, if we divide epistemological positions into naïve realism, critical realism and relativism, it seems that your main aim in Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge was to move from naïve realism to critical realism. But some of the points that have been raised in the debate on religious pluralism have created the impression that you have moved on even further and are, in effect, advancing a relativist epistemology. In fact, it seems that we can have two types of pluralism. That is to say, we can arrive at the plurality of truth on the basis of two readings: one is based on critical realism, whereby we recognize that we have certain limitations in discovering the truth and that we, therefore, discern the truth in different manifestations; the other is based on a relativist position, whereby we consider everything to be on a par. In other words, pluralism and a belief in plurality can be constructed both on the basis of critical realism and on the basis of relativism. What’s the basis of your position on pluralism?

A. Let us not lose sight of the fact that we are talking about religious pluralism and not pluralism in the absolute sense of the word, which would also embrace philosophy, science and so on.

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1 This is an abridged version of “Truth, Reason, Salvation”, a chapter in Soroush’s book: Serat-haye Mustaqim (Straight Paths), Tehran: Serat Publications, 1998. While this chapter includes some new points, it sheds more light on some of the things presented in the previous chapter. The original format of the article, i.e. an interview, is maintained here because some of the questions help the reader to put Soroush’s discussion of religious pluralism in the broader context of his ideas about religion and its interpretation and reflect some of the criticisms that his ideas on pluralism have met. [Ed.]
We are discussing religious pluralism and, in terms of meaning, religious pluralism has differences with the pluralism you will find in philosophy. This is a point we have to be careful about, otherwise, it can lead to fallacious arguments.

In philosophy and science, relativism is a dangerous pitfall. Although it is difficult to speak about specific instances in this area, it can be said in general and absolute terms that relativism is not an acceptable position. It is the type of fallacious conclusion that points to some kind of problem or fallacy earlier on in the premises.

Since truth in religion is different from truth in philosophy and science, one has to be careful about terminology. As you suggested, naïve realism is appropriate to a world that is assumed to be simple; sophisticated realism, to a world that is assumed to be complicated. The history of rationality in human societies, the insights human beings have gained into rationality, its twists and turns throughout the course of history, the errors it has fallen into, the impasses it has faced, the antinomies it has generated, the irresolvable disputes that have arisen over the years, and the discoveries that have been made concerning cause and reason have, all in all, rendered people more aware of the truth of rationality, its historicity and its capabilities. Perhaps there was a time when people expected more from rationality, but now science, reason and philosophy have become more modest and this modesty is the outcome of the growth of reason. This rational modesty will also undoubtedly extend its verdict to our understanding of religion.

Hence, my position, in fact, is the sophisticated rationalism or critical rationalism that you mentioned. That is to say, the actually existing world, be it religion, philosophy or nature, is much too complicated to be dealt with by judgements based on naïve rationalism or to sanction dogmatic commitment to one single option. And collective criticism and openness to criticism are among the most important tools that will allow our theories to become more complicated and advanced and possibly allow us to move closer to truth. One of the clear consequences of critical rationalism is to show that most of people’s certainties are little more than conjectures. This is not to say that people can never arrive at truth but that arriving at truth has no specific signpost. The signposts mentioned in traditional philosophy, such as observation, certitude, etc., are all fallible. Hence, one cannot easily say, this is true and that is not true. This is why, although, in critical rationality, the definition of “true” (which, of course, has rivals) as the correspondence with facts is accepted, nonetheless, this rationality recognizes that identifying actual