LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

Christian Theology of Religions Paper

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**Contents**

Introduction 1

**Defining Religious Pluralism**  2

**Defining Religious Exclusivism** 6

**Christian Theology of Religion** 8

Is Christianity True? 8

Are other religions true? 9

Do other religions contain truth? 10

Does Christianity save? 10

Do other religions contribute to salvation? 11

Is General Revelation sufficient for Salvation? 11

Does Special Revelation Require a Human Messenger? 12

Conclusion 12

Bibliography 8

**Introduction**

Over the last two centuries, religions have undergone significant change throughout the world.As different world powers extended their empires and influence, their home nations became more aware of the variety of religions that had previously been unknown by their populaces. As commerce between nations accelerated, more and more people traveled widely and became carriers for faiths that they had adopted in foreign lands or relayed stories about what they had witnessed of foreign religions. Missionaries also traveled to faraway places and returned with intriguing stories about the religions they had sought to overcome with their ministries.

In the last fifty years, the global marketplace has caused many people of differing faiths to interact. Understandably, frictions arose as people attempted to share closely held beliefs and found themselves rejected or had their beliefs dismissed out of hand. This friction became an impediment to the smooth transaction of business and business leaders as well as government leaders wished to resolve the issues in a way that would allow governments to co-exist peacefully and for trade to flourish. People who had no faith to defend just wanted everyone to “just get along”. As post-modernism’s influence increased, more and more people became less aware of the doctrines of the religions. This gave rise to the idea that all religions pointed to the same truths and that reasonable people should be able to make room for other people’s choices since there was a common truth underlying all religions. Also, a very popular talk show hostess in America, Oprah Winfrey, who has a viewership numbered in the millions, assertively shared her convictions that all religions pointed to the same god. Because of her influence, the topic of this philosophy of many paths to one god jumped into daily conversation of the populace rather than being a topic debated by theologians.

This philosophy is called pluralism and this paper will describe the growth of religious pluralism and explain the key concepts behind this philosophy. The paper will also present the philosophy of exclusivism and the exclusivist claims made by Christians. The paper will contrast these two philosophies and present a Christian Theology of Religion with supporting apologetic responses to the challenges raised by pluralist.

**Defining Religious Pluralism**

Religious Pluralism has been gaining acceptance around the world in the past century as people seek to find ways to find common ground and interact peacefully. Miles defines pluralism as,

Religious pluralists reject the claims of Christian exclusivism and Christian inclusivism, believing that one can find salvation through various religious traditions, belief systems, and ethics. At the popular level, pluralism is best understood by the notion, “All roads lead to God.” To the pluralist, Christ’s life and death on the cross are powerful examples of a life committed to God, but there are no universal or ontological implications of Christ’s life and ministry. Not all are “saved,” but believers in the gospel do not enjoy a privileged position with regard to salvation over adherents to other religions.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Pluralism began to gain scholarly support in writings prepared by Ernst Troeltch (1865 – 1923) and Arnold Toynbee (1899 – 1975). Troeltch pondered the question of world religions and “concluded that they bore a relative connection to “the Absolute.” Each was limited though each shared in the divine presence of the Absolute.”[[2]](#footnote-3) Toynbee argued that “the world religions shared a common essence. To him, the differences were in non-essentials. The common purpose behind the world religions was to correct self-centeredness. In order to overcome self-centeredness, man needs to have something outside of himself which commands his worship.”[[3]](#footnote-4) The ideas from these two men present an argument that all religions are essentially the same has become popular when considering the plurality of religions.

Pluralism specifically rejects any support for the superiority for Christ or Christianity. Pluralists believe that every major religion is able to access the religious ultimate that is available to them all. Oswald shares,

Salvation, enlightenment or whatever the religious objective, is present and meaningful in its own sense to each of the religions. Human religions have been shaped by historical and cultural factors yet each touch upon something that is higher than any one of them. Christians may say that Jesus is the only way, but that must be understood to mean that He is the only way “for them.” No religion can be privileged above another, but all of the must rather be appreciated.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Perhaps the person with the greatest influence in advancing the concepts of pluralism has John Hick. His is particularly fascinating as he began as an outspoken conservative Christian theologian. Hick moved from conservatism toward an explicit pluralism that walked away from his Christian core beliefs, until he ultimately rejected theism in favor of the ineffable “Real”. The Real was similar to the concept of the Absolute which Troeltch presented. Hick describes the Real,

in and of itself as not directly accessible in our experience. It is the external reality which comes to our experience via the interpretive schema of the mind’s categories for understanding. So, the Reach is totally ineffable. Although some religions people might experience it as a personal being (e.g. God, Allah, Krishna) and others might experience it as something impersonal (e.g. sunyata, nirguna Brahman), it cannot be said to have either of those characteristics, or any others for that matter.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Hick proposed three points in his description of pluralism. First, Hick defined that each different religion was a valid response to the ultimate reality. His second point was that each religion was historically and culturally influenced interpretations of the ultimate reality. The third point was to conclude that the various religions have a common soteriological basis for transformational salvation due to their connection to the Real. Hick’s model gave a tool to pluralists to advance their argument.

Pluralists declared that exclusivist claims divisive and destructive as they are put forward in discussions between Christians and other religions. Pitman explained,

It reinforces attitudes of superiority and creates barriers to effective dialogue. In spite of fervent affirmations to the contrary, it is inherently disrespectful of other religions. In fact, exclusivism, by its very nature, sets Christianity apart as unique, the only true revelation of God, the one and only means of salvation.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Some pluralists insist that the claims to Christ’s uniqueness and that biblical views are culturally conditioned. Since all religious views are culturally and historically limited, pluralists believe it is impossible for one religion to properly evaluate the truth claims of another religion. Nah contends that,

Pluralism diminishes the uniqueness of Jesus Christ by repudiating the view that God has been revealed fully, definitively, and unsurpassably in Jesus Christ. Rather, the Divine is revealed in all major religions. Jesus was simply one of the many great religious leaders who were used by God to teach divine truths and provide salvation for humankind. All major traditions contain truths and are, therefore, valid ways to salvation.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Around the world, religions are being asked to modify themselves to allow for civil interactions between followers of differing faiths. For instance, Heck shares that Islam is already prepared for a move to pluralism. Heck says, “The point, as drawn by many a Muslim thinker over the centuries, is that religious pluralism is part of the divine plan.”[[8]](#footnote-9) Another writer, Cohen, reports that,

For Muslims and Islamic states, this is about remembering that the pluralism on which Islam flourished as a civilization is no longer sufficient for the multiple religious and secular discourses of our contemporary world. The Qur’anic verse, ‘Had God willed he would have made you all one,’ must translate into a re-visioning of society where Muslim communities can truly accept that religious diversity may possibly be God’s will, challenge and blessing on earth. The imperative on us is how we free ourselves from dogmatism and prejudice and be allowed to interpret the Qur’an in such a way that translates meaningfully with human diversity at a local, national and global level.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Beckford contends that discussions that seek commonality among religions “analyze and/or advocate respect for the positive value of religious diversity in itself or as a means to the attainment of social and cultural cohesion and harmony” as an outcome of pluralism.[[10]](#footnote-11) The desire for cohesion and harmony seems to be the driving force behind the philosophy rather than a search for certainty of core truths. By elevating this thought, pluralists devalue setting a definitive truth. Goodman pointed out “Religions have real differences in truth claims, practices, and values. The differences are not confined to superficialities. Indeed, if a religion cannot be wrong, it cannot be right either, and setting religions above every moral or spiritual error does not accord respect to any.”[[11]](#footnote-12) In this statement, Goodman is declaring exclusivism wrong simply because it refuses to equivocate on asserting the truth statements regarding Christian beliefs.

**Defining Religious Exclusivism**

Oswald explains that “exclusivism or particularism” represents the traditional Christian view that salvation is “particular” to those in communion with God through faith in the mediatorial work of His uniquely incarnate son, Jesus Christ.”[[12]](#footnote-13) In this view, any teachings that do not align with Scripture are rejected as untrue. Also, since Jesus declared in John 14:6,[[13]](#footnote-14) that He offers the only pathway to salvation, no other religion can offer a solution for eternal salvation.

Islam and Christianity are the two primary world religions whose followers have adhered to exclusivist positions. Islam has resolutely declared that there is no other god than Allah. The attributes of Allah are not the same as the attributes of the God described by Christianity. Each of the religion’s followers have refused to declare that Allah and YHWH are the same person. The simple fact that Allah is described as a singular person, while the God of Christianity is comprised of a Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three persons operate in complete unity.

Christian Exclusivists consider that salvation is only found in Jesus Christ. A personal relationship with Christ is required to receive this salvation. So, in principal, salvation is found in relationship not ritual. Scripture is very clear that Jesus did salvific work on behalf of mankind and no other person could accomplish what He did. His whole in coming to live as a man was to show His desire to engage with mankind and to offer Himself as an acceptable sacrifice as payment for mankind’s sins. Christian exclusivists will strongly base their convictions upon what is written in Scripture and consider that Scripture authoritative. Any document that presents a position that is contrary to Scripture will be discounted and rejected. This lack of tolerance for other beliefs and asserted truths can lead to exclusivists being labeled as being discriminatory, closed minded, and dogmatic.

It is interesting to consider that God set His people apart from others, as is documented in Exodus 20. By setting them apart and teaching them to follow His commandments, God essentially set His people on a path to be exclusionists. God expressed in the Ten Commandments, that His people were to have no other god before Him. This traditional stance is not easily set aside in the face of a liberalized society. As the world becomes increasingly connected through technological advancements in communications and the increasing ease of travel cause people of many cultures to mix, exclusivists will be challenged in their approach to explain their faith to others. Being an exclusivist does not require a person to be insulting or dismissive of other people’s beliefs. If anything, the certain knowledge of a path to salvation should be a motivation to develop strong, respectful relationships with others so that they will be willing to listen to the believer’s truth statements that are shared in love. The person sharing their faith also must put a sincere effort into understanding the culture of the person to whom they are evangelizing. Corduan recommends that “the evangelist has to convey the message in such a way that the gospel is intelligible to the receptor’s culture and in such a way that the receptor can also trace his or her understanding of the gospel back to the biblical message itself.”[[14]](#footnote-15) By earnestly showing concern for others by investing time and effort to understand their presuppositions, an evangelist can maneuver around cultural barriers and relate fundamental truths to a person that has never heard such a presentation, while truly demonstrating their respect and concern for the other person’s well-being. Another key is to diligently pray for the person that is being shared with and invite the Holy Spirit to soften their heart as well as speak through the evangelist in a manner that conveys God’s love for the individual.

**Christian Theology of Religion**

A subsection of theology has developed to help Christians answer the question of how Christianity relates to other religions. This subcategory is called a Theology of Religions. The concept requires a Christian to ask themselves several key questions that an adherent to another religion might propose about Christianity and provide with clarity the answer to the question along with the biblical support to the answer. This paper will utilize the six questions that Corduan[[15]](#footnote-16) proposes along with two questions that Miles[[16]](#footnote-17) suggests.

Is Christianity True?

For Christians, the reality of their faith is very personal. They learn from Scripture that the Creator of all, intended to have a personal relationship with mankind. Man rebelled against God’s created order and sin marred the relationship that God had established. This sin separated man from God and the penalty for sin was eternal separation from God. God wished to re-establish the relationship with man, so He decided to pay the penalty price to re-establish the relationship. This was done because man was not able to pay the price himself. God reveals this story through the writings that have been collated into what is called the Bible (Scripture). This Scripture reveals that God came to Earth incarnate as Jesus. Jesus walked among mankind, revealed truth that was documented, and allowed Himself to be sacrificed as a propitiation for mankind’s sins. This act fulfilled many prophecies that were provided to give a factual basis for men to study and verify that God had done as He said He would do. Jesus said that He would send a helper (the Holy Spirit) to “teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26) This act of regeneration and indwelling by the Holy Spirit is an event that is personal and measurable by an individual believer.

This significant event is another testimony of fact to a believer. For centuries since Jesus’ ascension, this action has been occurring and has been testified to by millions of believers. A pluralist cannot assert that the same experience is experienced in other religions. Simply because of this fact, they cannot be considered to operate according to the same underlying foundational truth.

Are other religions true?

If we consider the answer to “Is Christianity true?”, we have a very difficult time validating other religions. It would seem any valid religion would be able to prove all of their truth claims and any invalid truth claim would invalidate the religion. Buddhism would say that there is no first cause to the universe, no creator and no such things as a permanent, primordially pure being.[[17]](#footnote-18) Therefore, if Buddhism is correct and Christianity is incorrect, then there would not be a fundamental truth that both could rely upon. In a similar way, Islam contends that Jesus is just a prophet, and did not die on the cross. Scripture documents that Jesus made claims that He was divine (Mark 14: 61-64; John 14:6; Matthew 28:18; John 6:38) and that he was crucified to death on a cross (Mark 15:6-15; Luke 23:33; John 19:18). Again, if Islam is correct and Christianity is incorrect, there cannot be agreement upon the foundational truth that Jesus is God.

Do other religions contain truth?

It is reasonable to consider that other religions do contain statements of truth. For instance, the Qur’an states Jesus was born of a virgin and that Jesus was a miracle worker. Those two statements are ones that Christians would agree to be true.

Wilhelm Schmidt proposed that it is reasonable to consider that all religions progressed from an original monotheism. Over time, these religions were distorted by mankind and possibly spiritual forces to include error and to pursue magic and ritual.[[18]](#footnote-19) Even though religions might have become polytheistic or animistic, there still remains traces of truth from the original monotheistic faith.

Pluralisms claim that these similarities of thought provide a basis to aggregate all faiths into a sameness is a gross oversimplification that does not withstand scrutiny. Since there are clearly definable truth claims that are different in each religion, they stand unique in their claims even if they agree on some truth claims. One cannot simply ignore the disparate truth claims and assert that all religions lead to the same conclusion.

Does Christianity save?

This question is appropriate to clarify that the Christian religion does not save anyone. A person who declares themselves to be Christian does not gain salvation. A person who is born into a “Christian” family is not a Christian by birth. In a similar way, a pluralist’s claim that all religions lead to the same truth is untrue. Simple intellectual acknowledgement does not make a thing so. A person receives salvation based upon a relationship they develop with the Creator. God is the one who provides salvation and it is not gained by any formulaic fulfillment of tasks by a person. Salvation comes to those who recognize the person of God, seek Him and ask forgiveness for their sinful ways, and then choosing to live according to the guidance provided by Scripture and the prompting of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 5:17)

A Christian is a person who has personal relationship with God, has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and is being sanctified through the on-going relationship with God (2 Thess 2:13).

Do other religions contribute to salvation?

Other religions contribute to the journey towards salvation by providing religious structures that are unable to satisfy the spiritual void that exists in a man’s soul. These solutions can provide a basis to compare a person’s experience with those presented by a Christian’s experience. There is great danger in other religions because they can satisfy some of a person’s desired by providing structure, comforting tradition, and acceptance by others who have pursued the same false path.

Scripture tells us in Rom 1:25, that any religion that does not glorify God is false. Just before this verse, in Romans 1: 21-24, Scripture describes how other religions lead a person to “worthless thinking and darkened hearts.”

So, a believer can show respect for other people’s beliefs and validate truth statements that exist in other religions that agree with Christianity. A primary concern should be to help the person understand the false truth claims and allow the person to question why Christianity supplies the valid truth claims.

Is General Revelation sufficient for Salvation?

Miles makes a strong case that general revelation was never meant to stand separately from specific revelation, hence it can not be counted upon to supply salvation independently of the specific revelation that was supplied by God’s actions to reach mankind.[[19]](#footnote-20)

Pluralists contend that all paths lead to “truth” and would propose that general revelation as perceived by men is sufficient for salvation. This assertion is not supported in Scripture and appears to be wishful thinking and an assignment to God as to how He should behave. Christians acknowledge the supremacy of God in all things and God asserts that Himself in Job 41:11. In view of this understanding of God, I see no reason to define another path to salvation than the one provided in Scripture. I can understand the conflict that arises when one considers those who have never heard the gospel presented and presuming that means they are condemned to eternal separation from God. As I consider those issues, I rely upon God’s character. Being supreme, He might have a way to validate men to being worthy of salvation that I am not aware of. It is not my challenge to answer this question for God. God has proven Himself to be a loving person who wants the best for His children.

Does Special Revelation Require a Human Messenger?

The church has been given the responsibility to share the gospel to all of mankind (Matt 28.18-20). Since this assignment was given by Jesus, who Christians acknowledge as God, it is safe to answer affirmatively to this question. It is true that God can specifically interact with any individual as He wishes. Such interactions could be in dreams or by speaking to them directly. Such interactions typically have to be interpreted by a believer who God has brought into contact with the non-believer. Also, persons can come to a saving knowledge of the gospel by reading Scripture themselves. This would presume the agency of a human messenger who wrote down God’s revelation, such as the Prophets and Apostles.

**Conclusion**

This paper has presented the philosophy of pluralism as proposed by John Hick and Paul Knitter; which contends that all major religions seek to connect humanity to an underlying truth and, as such, all religions should be acceptable to all members to all faith groups. This paper described the philosophy of exclusivism that many Christians adhere to, which is based on the belief that there is only one truth, and this is based upon the revelation of God through Scripture and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This paper then presented a Christian Theology of Religion and apologetic answers to the challenges that pluralists have proposed.

My conclusion after studying this topic is that pluralists are being influenced by the “relativistic” truth doctrine that is currently influencing mankind. This model proposes that truth is defined by each person and others do not have the right to define another person’s truth. Without a belief in absolute truth, a person is able to assert any position that can be conceived. This argument is silly to a person who believes in absolute truth, such as an exclusivist. As such, a pluralist’s declaration that all faith has a common root of truth is simply a suspension of reality by ignoring obvious facts. The pluralist proposition sounds appealing but does not satisfy the conclusions of adherents of many faiths. Christians certainly should remain in the exclusivist camp and lovingly explain that Jesus said in John 14:6 “I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father except through me.” This is an exclusive claim made by a member of the divine Trinity and removes the possibility of other paths to salvation. The exclusivist has the duty to explain the character of God rather than simply declaring their core truths. God’s nature is to love those He created, and He wishes to be very involved with His children in this life, as well as furthering the relationship with them into eternity. The Christian faith is not just a pathway to eternal life but is an exciting journey into eternity with an active, loving God.

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2. Timothy J. Oswald, “Christian Navy Chaplains and the Challenge of Expanding Religious Pluralism.” Vol. 020-0375, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid., p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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12. Timothy J. Oswald, “Christian Navy Chaplains and the Challenge of Expanding Religious Pluralism.” Vol. 020-0375, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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18. Winfried Corduan, Neighboring Faiths. A Christian Introduction to World Religions. p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Todd A. Miles, God of Many Understandings, Chapter 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)