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The Problem of Religious Pluralism

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The "problem of religious pluralism" engages several distinct but interrelated issues. The "problem" arises when one considers the variety of religious beliefs and practices in the world and, taking into consideration both their similarities and differences, attempts to formulate a coherent position on their origin, truthfulness, soteriological efficacy, and value in general.

Of these questions, the one that has received the most treatment is the question of the soteriological efficacy of the world's religions. That all religions contain some truth is not generally disputed: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Islam have the truth of monotheism, for example; some versions of Hinduism are also theistic in their final analysis of ultimate reality (see, for example, the theologies of Sankara and Ramanuja) and have well-developed theodicies, epistemologies, and absolutist ethical systems; the central role of self-giving love in Mahayana Buddhism certainly has biblical parallels, and so on. What Christians dispute is the eternal destiny of the adherents of these religions.

Scholars have staked out four main positions regarding this issue: strong pluralism, moderate pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism. Most of these positions have had supporters in the history of Christian thought, and most claim biblical support. Determining which position is best involves understanding the positions and their theological/philosophical implications and carrying out a thoughtful exegesis of the relevant biblical passages.

Strong pluralism views all religions (or at least all major religions, possibly excluding religions with significant practices that are morally repulsive, such as child sacrifice or ritual prostitution) as effective in attaining their own ends. Proponents of variations of this position include S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995) and David Ray Griffin, *Deep Religious Pluralism*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). According to this view, all religions are more or less equally valid, and perhaps even equally true. Christianity is true, and faithful Christians will go to heaven when they die; but Buddhism is also true, and faithful Buddhists will achieve nirvana, just as Hindus will attain moksa and Muslims will be rewarded in Paradise. This may seem like a clear violation of the logical principle of non-contradiction, but proponents of strong pluralism can argue that since each religion is true only for one group of people, the theory is not asserting that all religions are true at the same time and in the same manner, and therefore the view does not violate this principle.

The evidence in support of strong pluralism includes all the apologetical evidence that can be marshaled in favor of each religion. David Hume famously argued that the evidences for the truths of competing religious claims cancel each other out, and therefore count as evidence against all religious claims. Strong pluralism provides a different (and perhaps more consistently empirical) response to these evidences: they count in favor of their respective religious claims, and therefore substantiate the claims of their respective religions. It could be argued that all of the world's major religions have a strong empirical basis and therefore all should be viewed as empirically justified. Additional advantages of this theory are that it is very egalitarian and that it should encourage tolerance between the adherents of the world's religions.

However, strong pluralism faces the dilemma that although it embraces the truth of all religions, it is itself likely to be rejected by most of the practitioners of those religions. It is a strange situation when a theory that maintains that all religions are true must also maintain that all religions are mistaken regarding the truth of the theory itself. Additionally, pluralism (both strong and moderate) seems to undermine the motivation for evangelism and missionary outreach, a consequence that is unacceptable to evangelical Christians (and to the adherents of other missionary religions as well).

Moderate pluralism views all (or most) religions as culturally mediated attempts to grasp the same ultimate reality. It sees all religions as soteriologically efficacious in attaining the same end. The paradigmatic example of moderate pluralism is John Hick's "pluralistic hypothesis" (see John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*. London: Fount, 1977, and *An Interpretation of Religion*. London: Macmillan, 1988). Hick applies a neo-Kantian epistemology to religion: according to Hick, the world's religions are human attempts to grasp one ultimate and transcendent noumenal reality. This reality is known by many names: God, Yahweh, Allah, Brahman, etc. The theologies constructed within the different religions reflect the culture of each religion's adherents as much or more than they reflect the actual nature of the transcendent. Since all religions are worshiping the same object, all produce the same soteriological result.

One significant advantage of this view is that it does not condemn anyone for not believing in a God about whom s/he has not heard. By contrast, exclusivist views are often construed as implying that God lacks mercy and compassion and as entailing injustice on the part of God for making one's eternal destiny dependent on circumstances outside of one's control. Moderate pluralism overcomes these problems, casting God as completely merciful, compassionate, and just. Further strengths of this view are that it is egalitarian and that it should encourage tolerance between the adherents of the world's religions.

Problems for moderate pluralism include the fact that it seems to do away with the possibility of theological truth, turning all religious doctrines into culturally constructed interpretations that never correspond to actual reality. In this respect Hick's theory may be inconsistent, since his position seems to rule out theological truth, but is itself both theological and (presumably) true. Furthermore, although most Christians are probably willing to admit that their conceptualizations of God cannot do justice to God's true magnificence, many might want to argue that some particular religious views have a greater degree of correspondence to reality than do others, and that, therefore, some religions are more correct than are others. Moreover, it has been persuasively argued that moderate pluralisms like Hick's are a form of inclusivism that proposes a new "meta-religion" and subsumes all other religions under the umbrella of the quest for the transcendent. In this way moderate pluralism actually privileges this new philosophical meta-religion over all ordinary religions.

Inclusivism views only one religion as true, but views the other religions of the world as soteriologically efficacious paths towards the God of the one true religion. Examples of inclusivist thinkers include Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), 115–34, and Sir Norman Anderson, *The World's Religions*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1976). According to Christians who are inclusivists, Christianity is the only religion that is true, but other religions reveal some truths that are used by God to

lead people to salvation. According to Rahner, the faithful practitioners of the world's great religions are "anonymous Christians" who are responding in faith to the work of the Holy Spirit and would follow Christ if circumstances were such that they would have revelation of the gospel and opportunity to respond to it.

A variety of considerations stand in support of inclusivism. Both versions of pluralism mentioned previously are motivated at least in part by a worthy desire to understand the world's religions in a way that reflects God's mercy, compassion, and justice. Inclusivism shares this motivation, but responds in a way that is more clearly in harmony with the principle of non-contradiction. Unlike the two versions of pluralism, inclusivism does not undermine missions, the primary motive for which is proclamation of God's glory, though it does seem to take away some of the urgency of missions by making salvation available even to those who have not heard the gospel. Unlike Hick's pluralism, inclusivism allows for the possibility of theological truth, although it seems to entail that most religious traditions are in large part mistaken. Finally, inclusivism has clear support in the history of Christian theology.

One problem for inclusivism is the very fact that it grants both theological truth and the existence of a just and compassionate God. If God is just and compassionate, if God is omnipotent, and if theological truth is possible, then it seems likely that God would be able and inclined to arrange things so that most or all people are in a situation amenable to having theological truth. However, it does not seem that God has done this (except for the truths of general revelation), which is a situation that inclusivism needs to explain. Additionally, it could be objected that if inclusivism were correct, then God rewards incorrect religious belief by granting salvation to people who accept untruth.

Exclusivism views only one religion as soteriologically efficacious and the adherents of all other religions as lost. Examples of exclusivist thinkers are James Borland, "A Theologian Looks at the Gospel and World Religions," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33, n. 1 (March 1990): 3-11, and Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991. According to Christians who are exclusivists, Christianity is the only religion that is true, and although there may be some truths in other religions, these truths are not adequate to bring about salvation.

One argument for exclusivism is that it is most transparently in harmony with the principle of non-contradiction. As has already been seen, though, it may be possible to reconcile pluralism and inclusivism with non-contradiction as well. Like inclusivism, exclusivism allows for theological truth and has clear support in the history of Christian theology. Exclusivism also provides the most motivation for missionary evangelism: if the unreached will be eternally damned if Christians fail to bring the gospel to them, then the urgency of the need to do so is clear.

One problem for exclusivism is that to many it seems unmerciful, uncompassionate, and unjust of God to condemn millions to eternal punishment on the basis of an ignorance that they have not chosen or on the basis of mere intellectual error. Some question whether a loving God would design the world in such a way that people must know about Christ in order to escape eternal damnation but have no ability to acquire such knowledge. An additional problem with exclusivism is that it can and sometimes has led to intolerance towards other religions.

It has been seen that there are arguments for and against each of the leading interpretations of the situation of religious pluralism. It is not easy to determine which view is correct based upon considerations of reason alone. Fortunately, Christians do have another source of wisdom that they can turn to for answers to such perplexing issues: divine revelation. There is biblical data that is relevant to the problem of religious pluralism.

Strong pluralism seems to run afoul of the eschatological vision that runs throughout the New Testament: a single future eternal state that awaits the "righteous," and another future eternal state that awaits all the "unrighteous." If all people share in one or the other of these two futures, then the strong pluralist vision of a distinct future for the adherents of each religion is not possible. Heim suggests that the unique fulfillment of each religion may be a penultimate eschatological state, which could be followed by a final state that unites all religions in one. However, this strategy seems to reduce strong pluralism to moderate pluralism. Strong pluralism also seems at odds with the numerous biblical passages that condemn the neighboring religions of Israel and early Christianity (cf. II Kings 17:15, 16, II Chron. 33:2, 3, Jer.10:1-16, Matt. 6:7, Acts 19:26, 27, Gal. 4:8) and biblical assertions that there is only one true God, the God of the Bible (cf. Deut. 4:35, 39, II Chron. 20:6, Isaiah 45:5, 6, Mark 12:32-34, I Tim. 2:5, James 2:9).

Moderate pluralism fares better than strong pluralism vis-à-vis these biblical considerations. While it makes a more positive appraisal of non-Judeo-Christian religions than the passages cited above might seem to imply, it does not say that these religions are true, and it does seem to imply that there is one single ultimate transcendent divinity, which could correspond to the God of the Bible. Its relegation of Christianity to the status of one interpretation among many viable interpretations of the transcendent will be of concern to Christians, but since Christians accept that God's magnificence surpasses human comprehension, Christian hearts may resonate sympathetically with the understanding of God that seems to lie at the core of this theory. The question that must be addressed is the moderate pluralist view of the soteriological efficacy of non-Christian religions. Do the practitioners of non-Christian religions attain salvation through these religions and apart from Jesus Christ?

In John 14:6 Jesus is recorded saying "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father, but through me." The context of this passage indicates that Jesus was discussing his own place in God's plan of salvation. He seems to have viewed himself not as one among many providers of salvation, but as the one necessary and sufficient provider of salvation. This same soteriology is seen in I Tim. 2:5, where the apostle Paul writes, "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." If Jesus is necessary to salvation, then practitioners of religions that are without Jesus do not attain salvation through these religions apart from Jesus. Therefore moderate pluralism is not biblical.

The question that remains is whether there are true followers of God who do not knowingly follow Christ. Are those people who respond with faith to the revelation of God in nature and in the human heart (Psalm 19, John 1:9, Acts 14:16, 17, Romans 1:19, 20, Romans 2:12-29) "anonymous Christians," as Rahner argued, or is salvation only for those who specifically believe on the name of Christ?

There are a number of biblical considerations that seem to stand on the side of inclusivism. These include the biblical depiction of the nature of God: one would expect

a God whose nature includes love (I John 4:8) and mercy (Luke 1:78, James 5:11) among its central attributes to make a way of escape from damnation available to all people, including those who have not received information about the Christ. Furthermore, the Bible indicates that God desires the salvation of all people (II Peter 3:9); it can be interpreted as saying that God has provided a soteriologically adequate revelation of himself to all people (Romans 10:13-18, Titus 2:11); and it implies that God is drawing all people to himself (John 12:32). All this is in keeping with an understanding of God as an omnipotent creator. Surely such a being would create a world wherein his attributes of love and mercy are effectively demonstrated.

In concord with these considerations, there seem to be true believers in both testaments of the Bible who were neither Jews nor Christians (Job [Job 1:8], Melchizedech [Genesis 14:18], Abimelech [Genesis 20:1ff.], the Queen of Sheba [I Kings 10:9, Matthew 12:42], the centurion of Matthew 8:5-14, and Cornelius, who prior to his conversion to Christianity was called "a devout man, and one who feared God with all his household…and prayed to God continually" [Acts 10:2]). Peter's experience with Cornelius prompted him to say, "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him" (Acts 10:34-35). Such believers who are neither Jews nor Christians are likely to have been adherents of other religious traditions, and are likely to have obtained at least some of their beliefs about God through those traditions. Accurate beliefs about God that exist in other traditions may be a result of God's self-revelation through nature and in the human heart, but the possibility remains that adherents of these traditions gain at least some of the knowledge of God to which they are responding through these very religions.

There are also a number of biblical considerations that seem to stand on the side of exclusivism. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the negative view of other religions in both testaments. Although the theology of the Bible sometimes reflects the influence of the surrounding religions, the evaluation of these religions provided by the biblical writers is almost exclusively negative (see Daniel I. Block, "Other Religions in Old Testament Theology," and Gregory K. Beale, "Other Religions in New Testament Theology," in David W. Baker, ed., *Biblical Faith and Other Religions: An Evangelical Assessment.* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004).

More directly pertinent to soteriology are the many New Testament statements that make belief in Christ a prerequisite to salvation. Some passages seem to require belief in the specific name of Jesus. John 3:18 is illustrative of these, "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." This, of course, requires more detailed knowledge than is available through general revelation. Perhaps this is why Jesus asserted that "repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47). Perhaps he is affirming that there is no salvation outside of knowledge of the specific details of the gospel.

Both inclusivism and exclusivism have been defended within the orthodox Christian tradition, and both have defenders among contemporary evangelical scholars. Both inclusivism and exclusivism preserve the finality of Christ. As has been seen, both can claim biblical support. Since the Evangelical position on religious pluralism must be based upon God's revelation, this position must be developed through a thoughtful

exegesis that offers a reconciliation of the biblical considerations that are used to support both of these views.

Recommended Readings from Evangelical Authors:
General:
Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996.
Richard J. Plantinga, ed., *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and contemporary readings*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

Inclusivism:
Gerald R. McDermott, *God's Rivals: Why has God allowed different religions? Insights from the Bible and the early church*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007.
Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The finality of Jesus Christ in a world of religions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992.

Exclusivism:
James Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior*? Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005.
Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious pluralism and the question of truth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.