

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Possibility of an Inclusivist View of Religions

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Abstract

Religious pluralism and exclusivism are commonly seen as the primary ways to address religious differences, while inclusivism is often considered less effective. However, this essay defends the position of religious inclusivism and argues that it represents the most appropriate approach in an increasingly diverse world. The essay is divided into three parts: the first part briefly explains the three paradigms (Exclusivism, Pluralism, and Inclusivism), the second part points out the inconsistencies in exclusivism and pluralism, and the third part argues that the inclusive paradigm promotes the uniqueness of one's religion and provides a better understanding of other religious traditions than exclusivism and pluralism. Lastly, the concluding paragraph will summarize all the arguments presented in the essay.

Keywords: Inclusivism, Pluralism, Exclusivism, Religious Other.

1. Introduction

My interest in exploring the significance of religious inclusivism and interreligious exposure stems from my experience with Kedia. Before coming to America, Kedia's exposure to different religions was limited due to the lack of cultural diversity in her home country of Afghanistan. There, she had only been exposed to different branches of Islam. When Kedia gained admission to study Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame in the US in 2013, she became my roommate at the Graduate Residences, where students shared all the common areas. Kedia had never had close contact with a Christian, let alone a Catholic nun. I remember the awkwardness on Kedia's face when she saw me dressed in a black and white religious habit. She did not understand why I had to wear the same color of religious habit every day. Our first two weeks of living together in the same apartment were filled with fear, suspicion, and uncertainty. As the months went by, Kedia and I started interacting. Every occasion became an opportunity to understand ourselves. During our time together at the Graduate Residences, Kedia transitioned from feeling sorry for a Catholic nun who wore the same color of religious

habit every day to showing respectful curiosity about the significance of my religious attire and the meaning it holds for me. She became more appreciative of my commitment to dedicating my life to God through the service of others by living simply and saying no to most of the things people value, such as having children and material possessions, and choosing to allow my life to be directed by my religious beliefs.

Kedia and I did not change our religious identity. She remained a Muslim, and I remained a Christian. But we grew to appreciate each other more as individuals. We no longer pitied each other; instead, we empathized and respected each other's beliefs and cultures. Most importantly, we realized that to truly love each other, we couldn't ignore our differences. Over time, at the Graduate Residences, we carefully and respectfully explored our differences, deepening our connection with our faith traditions as well as with each other.

In this essay, we compare three religious typologies: exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism. Our research is based on historical texts and existing literature. The analysis and conclusions drawn in the essay are solely based on secondary data obtained from historical scholarship and scholarly interpretations of those

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works. By using qualitative and descriptive-analytical methods, our research provides valuable insights into inclusivism as a tool that can enhance cohesion and diminish religious ignorance

Globalization has led to increased interactions between people, cultures, and religions, making it important to understand the beliefs and practices of other religions in order to promote healthy interaction. Scholars have developed various approaches to address ethical and religious differences between religions. One such approach is Alan Race's threefold typology, which includes Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism. (Race 1983) These typologies were initially created to examine Christian attitudes toward other religions and analyze other religions' stances on religious pluralism. Race introduced these typologies in his book "Christians and Religious Pluralism" in 1983, and scholars have since widely used it in this field. (Coward 1985)

Some scholars argue that in the context of diverse religious beliefs, race typologies of exclusivism and plurality are more likely to address the challenge of religious differences in society. Irlenborn Bend distinguishes three areas where these challenges are experienced. First,

Intra-religious area: When faced with different religions, a specific religious community is prompted to clarify the uniqueness of its own beliefs and to explore whether awareness of others' beliefs might lead it to refine or revise its teachings. Second, inter-religious area: This is the realm of debate regarding the relationship between conflicting religious truth claims, as well as the impact of questioning these claims within a religion. Third, extra-religious area: This is where the relationship between diverse religious beliefs and other convictions is defined within the framework of the secular state. It's also the space to discuss the conditions under which religious citizens can publicly use reason. (Irlenborn 2010, 128) The next section will provide a brief synopsis of three typologies: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

2. Religious Exclusivism

Religious exclusivism refers to the belief that only one religion is true while all other religions are false. This model is usually associated with conservative evangelical churches, and its leading proponents include Karl Barth, Samuel Zwemer, Hendrik Kraemer, and Lesslie Newbigin. (Marbaniang 2007, 7) According to this view, there is only one God, and this God was revealed through Jesus Christ. Therefore, the

only way for humanity to be saved is through God, as revealed through Christ. As a result, Christianity is the only true religion, and its mission is to replace all other religions. This model is ecclesiocentric, as it holds that baptism into the church is necessary for salvation.

Before Vatican II, the Catholic Church was known for being exclusive to other religions. The Church taught that salvation was only possible within the Catholic faith (*Extra Ecclesiam nulla Salus*). Pope Boniface VIII (1302) expressed this belief by stating that the Catholic Church is the only holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church and that there is neither salvation nor the remission of sins outside of it. (Sullivan 1992, 24) In the most extreme form of exclusivism, salvation is reserved only for members of one's religion.

2.1 Religious Pluralism

John Hick, a British Presbyterian philosopher, is a prominent advocate of religious pluralism. In his book *An Interpretation of Religions*, Hick puts forward the most comprehensive theory of religious pluralism. According to Hick, the world's religions should be considered as "different human responses to one divine Reality." (Hick 1989, 3) He also argues that the primary goal of each major world religion is to transform human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness (Hick 1989, 300). In other words, it can be considered valid if religion helps individuals turn away from their self-centered tendencies and become more compassionate and caring towards others.

Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Hick share the same belief of "religious pluralism." According to Schmidt-Leukel, religious pluralism is a specific theory that evaluates the diversity of religions. This theory assumes that religious truth exists and must exist in diverse forms. These different forms are considered equally valid despite their differences. (Schmidt-Leukel 2017, 21). The main idea of religious pluralism is that all world religions and other faith traditions are equally valid paths to God. Pluralism and exclusivism are opposite spectrums. Exclusivism allows for only one valid path to Ultimate Reality, while pluralism supports multiple valid paths to Ultimate Reality.

2.2 Religious Inclusivism

Inclusivism is a belief that acknowledges the possibility of God's revelation being present in other religions, but it does not accept that salvation can be achieved without Christ. This view is represented by Karl Rahner's theory of "Anonymous

Christianity”. According to Rahner, Christ is the ultimate requirement for salvation rather than the church. He believes that Christ’s act of salvation extends beyond the boundaries of the church. (Chia, 2018, p.176). Put differently, Rahner holds that the “Mystery of Christ” is present to different degrees in non-Christian religions. As a result, salvation is also possible in those religions. This means that even if someone is not a part of Christianity, they can still live in God’s grace and achieve salvation. (Rahner et al., 1986, 135)Pope Ratzinger disagrees with Rahner’s theory of “Anonymous Christians,” which claims that individuals who have not heard the gospel can also be saved through Christ. Ratzinger views this as an inadequate, unacceptable, and pluralistic approach to religion. (Lamb, 2016) The Inclusivist perspective holds that while God desires the salvation of all people, it is ultimately through Christ that salvation is attained and that other religions may serve as intermediary paths toward this ultimate goal. Religious inclusivism is a middle ground between exclusivism and pluralism. It is practiced by both mainline Protestant Churches and the Roman Catholic Church.

3. Inconsistencies in Exclusivism and Pluralism

3.1 Pluralism

According to Gavin D’Costa, religious pluralism is nonexistent because pluralism always leads to exclusivism(D’Costa 1996, 225). He argues that the assertion of “Truth in all religions” is itself an exclusive claim. D’Costa believes that the Real, or the concept of Ultimate Reality, always contains contradictions; therefore, contradictory statements can be made about it. Additionally, he disagrees with Hick’s view that the Real is beyond all language and cannot be comprehended. D’Costa refers to this stance as transcendental agnosticism, ‘a claim that one cannot know what the truth is, except that there is a truth that is beyond us.’D’Costa argues that transcendental agnosticism is a version of exclusivism, and the same holds for Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s ‘perennial philosophy’ and Sarvapelli Radhakrishnan’s mystical unity of religions (D’Costa 1996, 232). D’Costa concludes that these pluralists are unaware of being exclusivists; in other words, they are anonymous exclusivists. According to Domenic Marbaniang, pluralists cannot deny being exclusivists, as exclusivity is one of the essential characteristics of a truth claim. As Marbaniang argues, truth, by its very nature, excludes everything else contrary to it. Therefore, he agrees with D’Costa’s view that pluralism is simply

another version of exclusivism; however, Seyyed Hossein Nasr thinks to the contrary. According to his Perennial philosophy, there is only one absolute truth. Still, the diversity of their forms and discussions is inevitable due to the emergence of religions in different times and places. Asnad Aslan disagrees with Hossein Nasr, arguing, “The Perennialist account cannot offer any solution to the doctrinal and ethnical conflicts of Religions, since it wants to hold as true every sacred formulation of Tradition. If every traditional doctrine of a given religion is venerated, how could the Perennial philosophy possibly reconcile the resultant conflict?”(Aslan 1994, 128–30)

Another criticism against pluralism is the idea that religions have incompatible doctrinal claims about Ultimate Reality. For instance, Christianity believes in the doctrine of the Trinity, which Jews and Muslims reject. On the other hand, monotheistic religions claim that a personal God exists, while Buddhists and many Hindus deny this. Additionally, Buddhists and Hindus believe in the doctrine of reincarnation, where people are reborn on this earth after death, but the monotheistic religions reject this belief. It is challenging to reconcile religions that hold such opposing views. The assertion by pluralists that all religions contain valid paths contradicts the principle of non-contradiction, which states that two opposing views cannot be true simultaneously.(Gottlieb 2023) To resolve this issue, pluralists attempt to make all religious beliefs consistent. However, this approach is flawed as it is not possible to eliminate valid conflicting claims by making all beliefs uniform. Pluralists believe that truth cannot be seen as an “either-or” scenario but rather as a “both-and” approach. (McGrath 1992, 371) Richard Rorty succinctly stated that hardly anyone, except for the occasional cooperative freshman, actually believes that two conflicting opinions on an important topic can be equally good. Pluralism often overlooks the challenges associated with reducing all religions to their lowest common denominator while disregarding the irreconcilable doctrinal differences. (Rorty 1982, 166)

A further issue with religious pluralism is that it undermines the purpose of the Church’s mission to spread the Gospel. If all religions are considered equal in their approach to the Ultimate Reality, then the Church’s role of being a universal sacrament and spreading the message of salvation becomes irrelevant. The Second Vatican Council’s *Ad Gentes* decree emphasizes that the primary mission of Catholic Church is to proclaim the Gospel to all people and restore everything in Christ. (*Ad Gentes* 1965, no.

1). The Church does not agree with pluralist “truth-in-all-religions” or equality of truth in all religions. Ratzinger clarifies this assertion by stating, “*Equality*, which is a presupposition of interreligious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content” (*Dominus Iesus* 200, No.22). This statement declares that all humans are equal, but not all religious beliefs are equal. Ratzinger argues that pluralism is a form of relativism and creates a significant problem for the Church and its mission (*Dominus Iesus* 200AD, No.4). McGrath agrees with Ratzinger that the pluralist view of all religions being equally valid is a superficial approach to the search for truth (McGrath 1992, 370).

3.2 Exclusivism-Criticism

Exclusivism is criticized for claiming that Christianity is the only true religion and that there is no salvation in other faiths. Exclusivists believe that all other religious claims are invalid and that only the Christian revelation is true. (Gnanakan 1992, 88) The problem with this view is that it disregards other religions and prevents mutual learning between different traditions. However, some argue that even religious texts like the Bhagavadgita and the Bhagvatthate that are considered erroneous have taught valuable principles like undivided devotion to God, giving up worldly attachments, humility, and forbearance, which Christians can appreciate.¹ In other words, religions can learn from each other even when they disagree on doctrinal grounds. However, because exclusivism has a closed mindset, it has little or nothing to share or learn from other religions.

Exclusivism can lead to a strong commitment to one’s tradition, but it also has drawbacks. This mindset can cause intolerance and the belief that truth is one-dimensional, even though truth can be complex and multifaceted. Moreover, we must acknowledge that even if our tradition holds the fullness of truth, our interpretation may not be entirely accurate (Chia, 2018, p.174).

3.3 Inclusivism-Criticism

Inclusivism appeals to many people because of its sympathetic nature towards other religions. It is believed to promote tolerance by claiming to respect different religious views. However, from the perspective of other religions, inclusivism is just another form of exclusivism. For instance, inclusivism asserts that Hindus cannot be saved by their dharma,

and Muslims cannot be saved by their works, but all are saved unknowingly through Christ (Marbaniang 2007, 5). This approach also suggests that other religions are only valid if they acquire meaning and value from one’s religion. Other religions are, therefore, said to contain only partial truth. *Dominus Iesus* reinforces this idea by stating that books of other faiths may have revelations. Still, none are inspired by the books of the Bible (*Dominus Iesus* 200AD, No. 8). Inclusivism has a profound respect for other faith traditions, but it is just another version of exclusivism because it defines other faith traditions using Christian standards. Further, Inclusivism, while promoting peace and respect for other religions, can sometimes sacrifice doctrinal truth for the sake of harmony and, therefore, cannot genuinely criticize the erroneous aspects of other religions. Additionally, inclusivists’ excessive emphasis on religious freedom may give the impression that religion is merely an opinion rather than an eternal truth.

Inclusivists face criticism for their emphasis on peaceful co-existence and freedom of religion. However, they argue that religion without freedom is a nightmare. In *Dignitatis Humanae* (The Declaration on Religious Freedom), the Second Vatican Council explicitly affirms that religious freedom is a fundamental right rooted in human dignity. In other words, religions must profess their beliefs with dignity and freedom. According to Peter Berger, “Dignity, faith, and freedom are profoundly linked.” (Berger 2016) Inclusivists maintain that authentic faith cannot exist if it is not freely chosen and expressed.

4. Promoting Religious Inclusivism

Inclusivism is a more appropriate approach to resolving religious conflicts because it promotes a positive attitude toward other religions. The Catholic Church’s *Nostra Aetate* document beautifully expresses this positive attitude by stating that “She [the Catholic Church] has high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men” (Pope Paul VI, 1965, No.2). Inclusivists argue that this approach is more likely to lead to peaceful co-existence among different religions. Hans Kung’s famous quote highlights the significance of peaceful coexistence among different religions. He states, “There can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions” (Kung 1991, p. xv). Paul Knitter emphasizes that achieving peace among religions requires openness and commitment to

¹Quote from *Proofs of the Divinity of Our Lord*, as cited by (Marbaniang 2007, 8) (*Dominus Iesus* 200AD, 8)

understanding those who practice different religions. It also demands a shift in theological perspective from viewing religious others as “Alien to Neighbor” (Knitter 2004, 2).

Inclusivists recognize the existence of truth in other religions. However, it firmly rejects the idea of religious indifference that comes with religious relativism. Inclusivism does not try to make all religious traditions identical or downplay their unique characteristics. Instead, it encourages people to confront and acknowledge religious differences without trying to eradicate them. According to Francis Clooney, by embracing differences and attempting to understand them, we can gain a deeper understanding of ourselves as well as others. (Clooney 2010, 12)

Inclusivism does not aim to ignore or eliminate the differences between religions. Instead, it offers a framework that allows these differences to be acknowledged, heard, and learned from. Recognizing religious differences is crucial since it establishes and distinguishes each religion’s unique identity. As John Cardinal Onaiyekan points out, it is necessary to recognize and respect the differences between religions since they play a vital role in creating common ground between religions. Religious practitioners must appreciate not only the similarities but also the differences among religious traditions (O. Onaiyekan, 2013, 1:36).

Furthermore, religious inclusivism tends to encourage interactions with people of other faith traditions. Michel recounted how engaging with others altered his views on Islam, emphasizing the many imperatives of such encounters. First, personal encounter offers the experience and understanding of the “other” in ways that no written texts would. Also, in encountering each other, religious traditions can discover their common humanity and common desire for peace and harmony (Michel and Irfan A 2010, 9). Secondly, personal encounters dissipate suspicion and fear and allow room for mutual understanding. A good example is my relationship with my roommate, Kedia. After years of living together, fears and suspicions dissipated, giving way to mutual trust and support. Inclusivism allows one to step into the other person’s shoes and know how the other feels. What Michel refers to as “seeing the ‘other’ with the eyes of the ‘other.’”(Michel and Irfan A 2010, 9).

5. Conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of the three-fold typology exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism reveals that

while each attempt to address ethical and religious conflicts, it has its advantages and disadvantages.

Pluralism is a belief system often criticized for being intellectually shallow and theologically superficial. The notion that all religions have a valid path to truth not only attempts to undermine the concept of religious truth but also insinuates that the mere existence of a religious idea is enough to guarantee its truth. (McGrath, (1992). I strongly agree that pluralism is a form of relativism and has failed to provide a solution to the doctrinal differences in religions. Hick’s philosophical pluralism, which is based on both moral and epistemological grounds, is inconsistent with religion.

Exclusivism is a belief system that considers only one religion as being effective while viewing the followers of all other religions as misguided. It is consistent with the principle of non-contradiction and allows for theological truth and the opportunity for mission and evangelism. However, exclusivism’s narrow interpretation of religious doctrine can lead to a limited understanding of other religions and foster an exclusive mindset. Additionally, individuals who are raised with an exclusive religious attitude are more susceptible to bias against other religions, fanaticism, and even religious bigotry.

In my view, Inclusivism is a more appropriate position than exclusivism and pluralism for two reasons. Firstly, it acknowledges that Christianity is the ultimate expression of other religions, but at the same time, it does not impose its views on others, allowing for a more open and respectful exchange of ideas. Secondly, it does not abandon its own beliefs. Given this background, Inclusivists should continue to explore how Christianity can effectively bear witness in an increasingly pluralistic world at the same time respecting other religions. As Max Warren notes, “Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on [people’s] dreams. More seriously still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.”...(Warren 2015) Warren suggests that treading safely and respectfully on the religions of others is indispensable; otherwise, we might dishonor them and their creator, who is also our creator.

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