

Dictionary of Evangelical Theology (Religious Pluralism)

Religious pluralism (or simply 'pluralism') is a position within the Christian theology of religions which holds that salvation and truth is neither exclusive to the Christian faith (as is held by those who subscribe to 'exclusivism') nor is the Christian revelation (taken as a whole or some particular aspect of it) normative, even if not exclusive, for those who are non-Christians (as is held by those who subscribe to 'inclusivism') but that all religions may be regarded as viable and appropriate means to salvation and as legitimately valid sources of ultimate truth about the Divine and spiritual life. Pluralism, as employed in this sense, is distinct from the sociological concept of religious plurality which simply captures the phenomenon of the existence and the dynamics of interreligious encounters within shared spaces. That this sociological sense is also referred to as 'pluralism' sometimes results in confusion of terminologies (Roumeas 2015).

The emergence of Religious Pluralism

The emergence of pluralism as a prominent position in the Christian theology of religions is a relatively recent development that dates to developments within Anglo-American Christian theology of the post-world war II period. The popularizing of the term itself and the typological framework of 'exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism' within which it is embedded may be traced to the work of Alan Race "Christians and Religious Pluralism" first published in 1983. In Race's seminal study, 'exclusivism' captures under it the various positions within Christian theologizing about other religions which consider the Christian gospel and faith in Jesus Christ as being the only valid means of attaining salvation. Hendrik Kraemer, 'The Christian Message in a non-Christian World', 1938; Karl Barth, 'Church Dogmatics', volumes 1&2 and Emil Brunner 'Revelation and Reason, 1947 are classic references often noted as espousing exclusivist views. Inclusivism, just as 'exclusivism', has had a long history in Christian theology of religions and has been linked by some to the theologies of Luke-Acts, the Apostle Paul and the church father Justin Martyr (Race 1983). Its classic exposition is traced however to the work of the German Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. The Roman Catholic Church Post Vatican II (1962-1965) has generally been regarded as being inclusivist (Race 1983, D'Costa, 1986).

Although the prominence of pluralism as a theological position is traceable to the second half of the twentieth century, it would be inaccurate to limit its historiography to that period. Pluralism is evident in the 19th-century theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher as well as in the theological reflections on non-Christian religions of such Christian writers as the German theologian Ernst Troeltsch, the American philosopher W. E. Hocking and the British historian Arnold Toynbee (Race 1993, D'Costa 1986, Thomas, 1969). But these theologies, radical as they were, were not deeply influential and they did not exercise much large-scale influence on either Protestant or Roman Catholic doctrine and practice (D'Costa 1986).

As a theological position, pluralism has had more by way of subscription amongst protestant theologians than by Roman Catholic theologians. But theologians who identify with it are found within both traditions nonetheless. On the Protestant side, its emergence has already been noted in the 19th and early 20th century 'liberal' theologies in both Germany and the United States of America but its prominence is often associated with the work of the Canadian historian of religions Wilfred Cantwell Smith and the British theologian and philosopher of religion John Hick. Amongst Roman Catholic theologians, Paul F. Knitter and Raimundo Panikkar are prominent voices. The latter's works, however, are of such nature that it is not always clear if it is accurate to categorise him as being a pluralist (D'Costa, 1986; 1990).

Arguments for Pluralism

Arguments for the pluralist position are diverse as individual Pluralists make the case for their adoption of pluralist views on different grounds. The arguments, however, tend to border on considerations of history, phenomenology, theology, and ethics.

On historical grounds, it has been argued that the privileging of one religion as 'the truth'—Christianity in this case – was understandable in previous historical epochs when sustained interaction between communities and individuals who did not belong to the same religious tradition were minimal. Appropriating the work of Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (1953) John Hick considers that the 'great religions' emerged during the axial age (800-200 BC) and that given the discrete historical developments that evolved in different communities during this period 'it was not possible', as Race puts it, 'for there to be one revelation to the world, which could be received in one theological form' (Race 1993, 83). Pluralist argue on this ground that much of the claim to superiority amongst religious tradition is in fact due to ignorance about how historical informed their religions are. For Hick, the historical specificity of religions is best interpreted as 'human responses to the Transcendent' which are of equal validity. History has also been employed to emphasize the statistical randomness of one's religious affiliation. For if one had been born in another historical period, the likelihood is there that one may in fact not have held their present religious beliefs. This alleged historical randomness to religious adherence is often discussed by some pluralist alongside the similarly deterministic role geography is considered to play in causing religious belief and adherence. Pluralist consider that given such randomness to religious beliefs (including beliefs about the superiority of any religion) it does not make much sense to insist on the superiority of any religions (Hick 1987). The historical perspective undergirds the pluralism of Ernst Troeltsch (1957), Alan Race (Race 1993) and Gordon Kaufman (Kaufman 1987).

Pluralism has been argued for on phenomenological grounds as well. In this regard, it has been felt that despite the apparent differences between religious traditions, there are evident within them profound similarities regarding such phenomena as their use of

symbolism, ritual, doxastic practices, mystical experience, ethics and the moral transformation brought about in their adherents (Hick 1980, 45). Wilfred Cantwell Smith, for instance, considers that Christian claims to uniqueness are equally matched by the claims to the uniqueness of other religious traditions so that 'a claim to uniqueness is not unique' (Hick 1987, 64). Hick argues on phenomenological grounds as well when he considers that Muslims, just as Christians, worship God in the mosques (Hick 1980, 46) and 'in Sikh gurdwaras God is worshipped as the maker of heaven and earth' (Hick 1980, 46). Although known by different names, it is the same 'Ultimate'; 'the Divine'; 'the Real' who is apprehended in the various mediating forms which the religions are (Hick 1980; Smith 1981).

Theological considerations have equally been critical in informing the pluralism of several Christian theologians. There are divergent strands within this broad spectrum of theologically informed pluralism. Some have argued based on the mystery of God and his transcendence that any particularizing claim to exhaustive knowledge of God is both naïve and arrogant (Samartha 1982). Some writers have pointed to Jesus' example of 'radical openness' to the religious other as providing both justification and example for dispensing with limiting the locus of Divine grace and salvation to Christianity (Hedges 2010). It has also been argued that the traditional Christian claim to superiority rests on a theologically misguided understanding of the Incarnation. Pluralist reconstructions of the Incarnation conclude that Incarnational language of the traditional sort (as in the Chalcedonian formula) are best understood as mythic rather than literal (Race 1993, Hick 1977). God's loving nature has also been thought of as being inconsistent with exclusivist views but consistent with and, in fact, necessitating pluralism (Hick 1987). For Raimundo Panikkar, 'Christ' is universal and is present in non-Christian religions while 'Jesus' is particular to Christianity (Knitter 1985).

With regards to ethics, some pluralists consider that exclusivist views have led to morally objectionable behaviours in the past. The European colonialization of foreign lands in the 19th century, the crusades of the middle ages and some contemporary religious conflicts are often cited as being closely associated, if not directly caused by, exclusivist religious views (Hick 1987). Pluralists have also considered exclusivist views to be hindrances to genuine interreligious dialogue and consider that pluralistic views of religions which regard other religions as just as valid as one's own provide a more secure starting ground for interfaith relations (Knitter 1987). Some Feminist theologians have linked patriarchy, sexism and female discrimination to exclusivist notions of truth and argue that only pluralism is able to cohere at a moral level with the values of feminism (Ruether 1987, Gross 2001).

Criticisms of Religious Pluralism

Criticisms of pluralism are numerous and focus on different aspects of the pluralist argument. Pluralists' appeal to 'historical consciousness' has been criticized for entailing relativism. Troeltsch was alert to this in his lamenting 'the poverty of historicism'. If all religions and their claims to truth are nothing more than the products of (or at the very least, deeply informed) historical accidents, then 'truth' is only relative and moral judgements about aspects of religions which seem repugnant are rendered problematic. It also follows that the pluralist paradigm is itself nothing more than a historical accident which is as relative as other positions. But given that pluralists contend that the pluralist position is the truth (although Hick calls his pluralism an 'hypothesis'), they must either give up historicism (and thereby remove the basis for holding pluralism true on considerations of history) or reckon their pluralist position as only historically relative (Runzo 2010). D'Costa argues on similar lines when he contends that the pluralist position is as exclusivist as 'exclusivism' in that the pluralist privileges his own supposedly more informed perspective over and above other perspectives on grounds which are epistemologically akin to the how the exclusivist holds his position (D'Costa 1996). Alvin Plantinga has argued that the usual reasons advanced for regarding subscription to the exclusivist paradigm to be arrogant are philosophical suspect. (Plantinga 1995).

Postmodernism has presented unique challenges to the pluralist paradigm as well. Postmodernism's suspicion of both universality and claims to objectivity have made some to regard pluralism as a colonial project (Tanner 1993). George Lindbeck and others influenced by Wittgenstein's philosophy of language have argued that the tradition-specificity of all theological language means that all theological discourse is necessarily particular. The pluralist claim to understand what all religions teach and to discern a unity of essence in them have been argued to be naïve. Concepts such as God, salvation, revelation, love, heaven, atonement, etc. are said to only make sense when spoken about within the limits of their cultural-linguistic contexts. While pluralism tended to see similarity in the different religions (as in claims that they all orient toward the same 'Divine' or 'Ultimate') Particularists stress the utter difference between religions conceptualizations of even the 'Divine' or 'Ultimate' (Lindbeck 2009). Mark Heim, in this vein, criticizes pluralism for being insufficiently pluralistic. A truly pluralistic pluralism, according to Heim, would allow for a multiplicity of salvation (i.e. 'salvations' rather than the singular 'salvation') as being the goal of religions (Heim 1995). Hick's pluralism, in particular, has been criticized on grounds of being the product of philosophical conjecture than as Christian theology properly speaking. This, because it severs the link between tradition and theological reflection and weakens the very basis upon which theology derives its legitimacy (Moyeart 2013). Pluralism has faced with difficulty with providing a 'global ethic' which all religions can agree to (Arthur 2014). Critics have contested the necessity of

making pluralism a condition for successful interreligious dialogue (Moltman 1990, Tanner 1993).

Religious Pluralism and Evangelical Theology

The pluralist perspective does not seem to sit well with Evangelical theology. Pluralists' insistence that mission as traditionally understood and practised give way to interreligious dialogue and 'mutual learning' has not been endorsed by evangelicals and conservative theologians (Milbank 1990). Lesslie Newbigin draws from Alasdair McIntyre's criticism of enlightenment pretensions to objective value-free neutrality to critique pluralist notions of justice and rationality (Newbigin, 1989). It has been suggested that pluralism may well be the product of a loss of confidence in the Christian faith (Pannenberg 1990).

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