



On Religious Diversity

Robert McKim

Print publication date: 2012

Print ISBN-13: 9780199774029

Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2012

DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199774029.001.0001

Exclusivism about Salvation

Robert McKim

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199774029.003.0004

Abstract and Keywords

Exclusivism about salvation, or salvific exclusivism, is understood to combine two claims. First, only one's own tradition delivers salvation, and, second, only members of one's own tradition can achieve salvation. There is discussion of the relationship between the second of these claims and the requirement that certain beliefs must be held if salvation is to be achieved. A case against salvific exclusivism is provided. Proposals from J. A. DiNoia, William Rowe, Alan Race, and others are considered.

Keywords: exclusivism, salvific exclusivism, J. A. DiNoia, William Rowe, Alan Race

The most natural way to understand exclusivism on the matter of salvation is, I think, to take it to be the combination of the following two claims:

ES1 Our tradition alone delivers salvation.

ES2 Only members of our tradition can achieve salvation.

ES1 says that ours is the tradition whose mechanisms, whatever they may be, make it possible to achieve salvation. It is the only vehicle, the only means, to salvation.

I am construing the notion, central to ES1, of being the only tradition that delivers salvation in a broad way. It may be that the tradition does not understand *itself* to deliver salvation but rather conceives of salvation as something that is, say, bestowed by God. For example, many, if not all, Christians would consider it to be a serious misrepresentation to say that it is their

tradition as such that makes it possible to achieve salvation. However, their view would be, first, that there are aspects of reality or mechanisms that make salvation possible and that their tradition describes these aspects of reality or mechanisms, and their significance, more completely and more accurately than does any other tradition. Their view would also be, second, that these aspects of reality or mechanisms are somehow uniquely associated with their tradition, internal to it and owned by it in some sense or another. I am construing the claim that our tradition alone delivers salvation in a broad way so that it includes cases in which the two views I have just mentioned are endorsed.

ES2 says that only members of our tradition can be the beneficiaries of whatever vehicle delivers salvation. A position may not sensibly be classified as exclusivism unless it excludes. And exclusivism about salvation will count as such only if it excludes some people, probably many people, from salvation, which ES2 certainly does. However, ES2 says nothing at all about how many (if any) members of our tradition *do* achieve salvation. Thus ES2 is consistent with, and may sometimes coexist with, complete uncertainty on our part about this matter or even with pessimism in this regard, where this would involve something along **(p.53)** the lines of an expectation that very few members of our tradition would achieve salvation. In addition, ES2 is consistent with its being the case that people who are not members of our tradition can achieve salvation—but only in the sense that they can do so if they become members of our tradition.

Exactly what membership requires and involves can vary considerably. The best way to approach this issue, I think, is just to say that what membership requires and involves in the case of any particular tradition is what that tradition considers it to require and involve. It might require, for example, taking part in some sort of initiation ceremony, regularly participating in various rituals, or in some other way explicitly and publicly indicating one's belonging. It might require mutual recognition of membership on the part of other actual members. It might require having gone through a private change of heart or coming to hold certain beliefs, these being matters that others, including other members, may not be privy to. Membership might even be thought to require being a recipient of a certain divine grace or to require having received salvation. And *these* are matters that a possible member may be uncertain about even in her own case.

Let's refer to ES1 and ES2, respectively, as *exclusivism about the means of salvation* and *exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation*. Exclusivism about salvation combines both of these. It says both that our tradition is the only good one in a particular respect and that its members alone are privileged in a particular respect. It alone can deliver salvation, and its members alone can achieve salvation.

Exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation does not explicitly exclude the possibility that there is more than one means to salvation. It says that members of our tradition alone are the beneficiaries of whatever means there may be. So ES2 is consistent with there being a curious arrangement in which traditions other than ours deliver salvation—but only for us. Exclusivism about salvation, the combination of ES1 and ES2, rules out this curious possibility: it does so just because it includes ES1.¹

There are, as I shall discuss, plenty of people who endorse exclusivism about the means while rejecting exclusivism about the beneficiaries.² (Everyone who satisfies this description should, I think, be classified as an inclusivist.) Indeed, strictly speaking, not only is exclusivism about the means consistent with a **(p. 54)** rejection of exclusivism about the beneficiaries: exclusivism about the means is even consistent with universalism about salvation, which is just the view that everyone will achieve salvation.

On the other hand, although one could consistently endorse exclusivism about the beneficiaries without endorsing, and even while denying, exclusivism about the means, this would be—as I indicated in the paragraph before last—a curious combination of views. So it is not surprising that few have endorsed this particular combination. Indeed, it may be that no one has ever done so. Certainly, those who believe that only members of their tradition can achieve salvation typically also believe that what accounts for this being the case is the fact that (as they see it) their tradition alone delivers salvation. Chances are, then, that anyone who endorses exclusivism about the beneficiaries is a full-blown exclusivist about salvation.

Exclusivism about the beneficiaries makes reference to members of our tradition. Now it is conceivable that someone might—for who knows what reason—count everyone who has ever existed as a member of his tradition. If so, such a person might, in turn, endorse ES2 and take it to mean that everyone who has ever existed can achieve salvation. Perhaps such a person should not be classified as an exclusivist; perhaps this would be pluralism about salvation or a version or, more likely, an aspect thereof. The problem here, if there is one, is easily solved. One way to do so is just to assume that ES2 involves a notion of membership that excludes some and probably many. Hence someone who counts everyone as a member of his tradition is not actually subscribing to ES2—even if he seems to be doing so. Such a person is not an exclusivist about the beneficiaries and hence is not an exclusivist (about salvation) *simpliciter*. I am inclined to take this approach since my main interest is in the actually existing major religions and not in possible nonexistent religions—such as an imaginary religion that counts everyone who has ever existed as a member. And the major global traditions generally have notions of membership that exclude many. There are members who are in and outsiders who are out. An alternative approach—that is, an alternative way to ensure that the views under discussion that do not

seem exclusivistic are not classified as such—would be to allow that such a person *is* subscribing to ES2 but to add that there is a third claim (in addition to ES1 and ES2) to which all exclusivists about salvation also subscribe, such as the claim that that many, perhaps most, people will not achieve salvation—even if everyone *can* do so.

Exclusivism about salvation (which is, recall, the combination of exclusivism about the means of salvation and exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation) is closely related to what I called (in chapter 2) “exclusivism about the truth about salvation”:

ET2 We are right about salvation, and all other traditions are wrong in their claims in this area.

(p.55) But these positions are distinct. An advocate of ET2 might, for example, be a universalist about salvation who believes that all outsiders will achieve salvation as a result of a process over which our tradition claims ownership. (This is one of the claims that, in accordance with ET2, he believes himself to be right about.) However, someone can, of course, consistently be both an exclusivist about the truth about salvation and an exclusivist about salvation. This is just to say that someone who is an exclusivist about the truth about salvation may believe that the truth about salvation is just what ES1 and ES2 say it to be. Indeed, many people believe this to be so with respect to their own tradition.

Belief and Salvation

Belief of some sort is often understood to be required for salvation. Let's refer to the assumption that belief is so required as the *belief requirement*. So the belief requirement says:

ES3 Belief (of some specified sort or another) is necessary for salvation.

In any case in which ES3 is actually proposed, it will naturally involve a statement of *which* beliefs must be held if salvation is to be achieved. Sometimes, for example, the following type of claim is made by exclusivists:

ES4 Belief that our tradition alone makes salvation possible is necessary for salvation.

For example, there are Christians who contend that the belief that salvation can be found through Jesus alone is necessary for salvation. That is, they contend that holding this particular belief—that salvation can be found through Jesus alone—is necessary for salvation.

ES4 would explain why ES2 (exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation) is true, for only members of our tradition will have the belief mentioned in ES4

with respect to our tradition. If ES2 is true, there must be *something* that makes it true, and ES4 certainly is one possibility.

Obviously, it may not be the particular belief alluded to in ES4—namely, the belief that only one's own tradition makes salvation possible—that is understood to be required for salvation. What is understood to be required may be this belief combined with one or more other beliefs, or it may be other beliefs entirely. Or what is understood to be required may be belief in all or most of the central or most important tenets of one's tradition or belief in some subset of these most central and important tenets. ES4 is, therefore, a special case of ES3, the belief requirement.

(p.56) The beliefs in question may all be such that only members of our tradition (the tradition from within which exclusivism is being stated) would hold them. Or they may include beliefs that are held as well by outsiders or by some outsiders. For example, the beliefs in question might include the belief that there is a deity and the belief that the deity has some standard theistic properties—beliefs, in short, about which there is considerable agreement among the theistic traditions. There is nothing problematic about such a case. It merely illustrates the point—and it is one to which exclusivists about salvation need not object—that nonmembers can satisfy a necessary condition of salvation.

When you add the belief requirement (ES3) to the combination of ES1 and ES2—or, more precisely, when you add a statement that exemplifies ES3 and that indicates which particular beliefs must be held if salvation is to be achieved—what you then have may be thought of as a particular variety of exclusivism about salvation. In that case, there would be at least as many varieties as there are statements of the belief requirement.

However, to revisit a theme touched on in the first section of this chapter, there may be instances in which the inclusion of the belief requirement is not best thought of as modifying the exclusivism with which we began, but rather as a way to understand it. I have in mind cases in which holding certain beliefs is understood to be partially, or even entirely, definitive of membership in our tradition, so that if you do not hold the beliefs in question, you are not a member of our tradition. In that case, ES2 already implicitly contains a form of the belief requirement, and we do not add an additional requirement by making it explicit. As mentioned, however, religious traditions vary with respect to the extent to which they consider belief to be a requirement of membership.³

Yet another possibility in this general area is that the belief requirement, or a particular statement thereof, would be thought to be what exclusivism about salvation consists in. For example, J. A. Dinoia characterizes exclusivism as “the view that salvation requires explicit faith in Christ prior to death” (*The Diversity of Religions*, ix), and he means, of course, to define Christian exclusivism.

Exclusivism, understood in this way, would presumably entail ES1 and, depending on the relevant notion of membership that is involved, may also entail ES2.

(p.57) The belief requirement is quite different from the view that belief (of some sort or another) is *sufficient* for salvation, although these views certainly are sometimes found together. If belief of some sort is understood by an *exclusivist* to be sufficient for salvation, it must be belief that is uniquely held by members of the tradition in which alone salvation is understood by the exclusivist to be found.⁴ More broadly, any condition that an exclusivist will take to suffice for salvation must be such that it can be satisfied only by a member of the exclusivist's tradition. Someone who thinks that a sufficient condition of salvation can be met by an outsider is not an exclusivist. She may be an inclusivist or a pluralist, depending on what else she says.⁵

The claim that belief, or any other condition or state of affairs, is sufficient for salvation is compatible with there being other factors, too, that are sufficient for salvation. Indeed, strictly speaking, it is compatible with there being in everyone's case some condition that obtains or some mechanism that is relevant and that, in every case, suffices for their salvation, which is just to say that it is compatible with universalism about salvation.⁶

(p.58) Some Examples

Exclusivism about salvation is quite common. It has motivated, sometimes in combination with other factors, much missionary activity throughout the world on the part of a number of traditions.⁷ Here are some examples of these themes. A prayer booklet issued a few years ago by Southern Baptists in the United States at the time of Diwali, the Hindu "Festival of Lights," probably bespeaks exclusivism about salvation. It says that Hindus worship "gods which are not God" and that Hindus have "darkness in their hearts that no lamp can dispel." The booklet asks Christians to pray for the residents of various Indian cities, commenting thus on some of these cities: "Mumbai is a city of spiritual darkness. Eight out of every ten people are Hindu, slaves bound by fear and tradition to false gods and goddesses.... Satan has retained his hold on Calcutta through Kali and other gods and goddesses of Hinduism. It's time for Christ's salvation to come to Calcutta."⁸

The remark that Hindus have "darkness in their hearts that no lamp can dispel," in addition to being an unfortunate gibe on the occasion of Diwali, and one that led to Hindu protests in India and elsewhere, probably indicates that some Southern Baptists believe that Hindus, at any rate, are not going to achieve salvation. Not at any rate if they remain Hindu. To be sure, the notion of having darkness in one's heart does not interpret itself (though it seems less than entirely laudatory) and does not explicitly mention salvation. It might be a matter of having limited knowledge, for example. Perhaps one could even

believe that people can be saved while remaining in the darkness in question. And these remarks concern Hindus and not non-Christians in general. Still, it seems reasonable to say that there are, at any rate, strong hints of exclusivism both about **(p.59)** the beneficiaries and about the means of salvation here. The Southern Baptist Convention has circulated similar prayer books aimed at Jews and Muslims. Actually, the overall situation seems to be that the members of this denomination generally believe in exclusivism about the means of salvation but disagree among themselves about exclusivism about salvation tout court, with some endorsing and some rejecting it.⁹

Sometimes the Roman Catholic strand within Christianity has appeared to endorse exclusivism about salvation, though this tradition appears to have gradually shifted in an inclusivist direction. The remark that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“Outside the church there is no salvation”), a statement that seems to be traced to Saint Cyprian of Carthage, a bishop of the third century, and that has been the subject of much discussion over the centuries, may combine exclusivism both about the means and about the beneficiaries, although it is anything but a remark that interprets itself. These remarks from the Council of Florence (1438–1445) may also give expression to this combination:

[No] one remaining outside the Catholic church, not just pagans, but also Jews or heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life, but they will go to the “everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels” unless before the end of life they are joined to the church.
(www.ewtn.com/library/councils/florence.htm)

Likewise for this remark from Pope Boniface VIII:

We are required by faith to believe and hold that there is one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church; we firmly believe it and unreservedly profess it; outside it there is neither salvation nor remission of sins. (quoted by Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982], 10)

Dominus Iesus may endorse exclusivism about the *means* of salvation:

There is only one salvific economy of the One and Triune God, realized in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of god, actualized with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit and extended in its salvific value to all humanity and to the entire universe: “No one, therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit.” (section 12)

(p.60) And exclusivism about the means of salvation also seems to be presented in the New Testament. Some of the relevant remarks are these:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. (John 14: 6)

And there is salvation through no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4: 12)

For there is one God;...there is also one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all. (1 Timothy 2: 4-6)

The claim that belief—in this particular case, belief in Jesus—is necessary for salvation is made in the following remarks. Herman Otten, publisher of an unofficial Lutheran newspaper, *Christian News*, was quoted as follows in a recent newspaper article: “We don’t hate the Muslims, the Jews, the Sikhs. We love them, therefore we want to let them know that they are lost, they are eternally lost, unless they believe in Jesus” (“Heresy Seen in Service for September 11,” *New York Times*, February 8, 2002). Because of the content of the belief that is said to be required, what we find here is, in effect, a statement of the belief requirement that amounts to exclusivism about the beneficiaries. I take the *belief in Jesus*, of which Otten makes mention, to involve something along the lines of trust in Jesus combined with belief that various uniquely Christian beliefs about Jesus are true. So he is saying that *both* of these components are necessary for salvation.

When the belief requirement is stated, it is sometimes accompanied by an indication not only of which beliefs must be held but also of how they must be held. For example, the following remarks are from an encyclical issued by Pope Leo XIII on June 29, 1896: “[Jesus Christ] requires the assent of the mind to all truths without exception. It was thus the duty of all who heard Jesus Christ, if they wished for eternal salvation, not merely to accept his doctrine as a whole, but to assent with their entire mind to all and every point of it, since it is unlawful to withhold faith from God even in regard to one single point” (www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_1-xiii_enc_29061896_satis-cognitum_en.html, section 8). I take this not to mean that one must assent to all truths—a time-consuming and demanding endeavor if ever there was one—but rather that one must assent to all key teachings of the church, or something along these lines, and that one must do so wholeheartedly. A similarly demanding standard is specified by Abu Nabhan Jaid ibn Khamis al-Kharusi, an Ibadi Muslim scholar from Oman: “The people of the truth are the Ibadis—they are the people of straightness on the path, and their religion is the true one and their teaching is the truth.... Nonetheless only the sincere among them will be **(p.61)** saved.... There is no escaping from God's punishment *for anyone who disagrees with or is ignorant of a single letter of the true religion...*” (Quoted by Valerie Hoffman in “Ibadi Muslim Scholars and the Confrontation with Sunni Islam in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century

Zanzibar," *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 1:95, 2005. My emphasis).

Exclusivism about the beneficiaries that involves belief that is both uniquely held by members of the relevant tradition and that is understood to be sufficient for salvation seems to be expressed in these passages in the New Testament:

For God so loved the world that He gave his only-begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through Him. (John 3: 16)

[Everyone] who believes is put right with God.... If you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised him from death, you will be saved. For it is by our faith that we are put right with God; it is by our confession that we are saved. (Romans 10: 4, 9)

He who believes in the Son has eternal life.... (John 3: 36)

This New Testament passage, too, seems to say that belief is sufficient for salvation, although the emphasis here is on *belief in* rather than belief that something is the case:

He came to his own country, but his own people did not receive him. Some, however, did receive him and believed in him; so he gave them the right to become God's children. (John 1: 11-12)

And the following passage seems to say that belief is necessary, as well as sufficient:

[Jesus] said to them, "Go throughout the whole world and preach the gospel to all mankind. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16: 16)

The Qu'ran also seems to have many clear statements to the effect that holding certain beliefs is necessary for salvation, including these:

As for those who disbelieve in God's signs, for them awaits a terrible chastisement. (3, 1) (*The Koran Interpreted*, a translation by Arthur J. Arberry [Toronto: MacMillan, 1969])

(p.62) As for the unbelievers, their riches will not avail them...they shall be fuel for the Fire.... Say to the unbelievers: "You shall be overthrown, and mustered into Gehenna—an evil cradling." (3, 9)

As for the unbelievers, I will chastise them with a terrible chastisement in this world and the next; they shall have no helpers. (3, 49)

Sometimes the belief that is taken to be necessary for salvation seems to be understood to include a willingness to acknowledge the prophethood of Muhammad.

There are also some Qu'ranic passages that suggest that what will result in condemnation is not unbelief per se but rather unbelief combined with a moral deficiency of some sort, in particular, an absence of righteousness and a preference for this world over the world to come. (Consider these passages, for example: "Surely the unbelievers, who have done evil, God would not forgive them, neither guide them on any road but the road to Gehenna, therein dwelling for ever and ever..." [4, 165]; "And woe to the unbelievers for a terrible chastisement, such as prefer the present life over the world to come..." [14, 3].) Perhaps the situation is that both belief in certain key doctrines *and* righteousness are taken to be necessary for salvation. Hence an absence of either, and perhaps all the more so an absence of both, will result in condemnation.

The following passage may specify a number of additional necessary conditions for salvation, in addition to belief and righteousness:

Only he shall inhabit God's places of worship who believes in God and the Last Day, and performs the prayer, and pays the alms, and fears none but God alone.... (9, 18)

However, it may be that the additional requirements are to be understood as part of what righteousness consists in. And in some of these passages, *belief* (and *unbelief* and their cognates) may be serving as shorthand for a combination of belief and one or more other conditions, after the fashion mentioned previously.¹⁰

In addition, the position presented in the Qu'ran may be that, together, belief in certain key doctrines and righteousness are *sufficient* for salvation. This seems to be the import of these remarks:

Surely those who believe and do deeds of righteousness—unto them the All-merciful shall assign love. (19, 95)

(p.63) Those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness—theirs shall be forgiveness and general provision. (23, 49)¹¹

Naturally, passages such as those I have quoted must in each case be interpreted within the context of the relevant text as a whole and of the relevant tradition as a whole. Nevertheless, such passages seem to lend themselves to being read in the ways that I have suggested. The onus is on those who contend otherwise to show that the quoted passages do not say what they appear to say. However, I do not mean to as much as suggest here that either the New

Testament or the Qur'an as a whole, not to mention the relevant religious traditions taken as a whole, are best understood to endorse the views I have taken the quoted passages to express. (A reader who is puzzled by this remark may want to take a glance in advance at the inclusivist options discussed in the next chapter.)

It goes without saying that what position one takes on salvation, for example, and whether one is an exclusivist, an inclusivist, or something else entirely on this matter will be, in large part, a function of what other beliefs one holds. Such beliefs do not dangle unsupported on their own but rather are sustained by a web of other beliefs. For example, the various Christian positions taken on salvation are, in part, a function of the variety of views held by Christians on the nature of the atonement. In particular, those who think that the suffering of Jesus atoned for our sins, making it possible for us to be saved from their consequences, probably are somewhat more likely to be exclusivists than those who think that the sacrifice of Jesus is important because it captures the essence of what a person should be willing to do for others, shows victory over hatred, betokens the ultimate triumph of good over evil, or the like. That being said, the former option concerning the atonement hardly entails exclusivism; indeed, it is endorsed by many who reject exclusivism.

Assessment of Exclusivism about Salvation

I do not aim to give a comprehensive assessment of the merits of each of the responses to other traditions that I am distinguishing. Here I will just make a few observations about exclusivism about salvation, the first three of which are objections to this view.

(p.64) First, exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation has a worrying feature. Salvation would be a benefit of no small significance. It would involve, presumably, being in as good a situation overall as one can be in, and it would last for a very long time and possibly forever. The worry arises from the fact that it is quite common for groups to believe that they are special in various respects, just as individuals are disposed to think that they are special. Religious groups in particular often think they are superior to other groups with respect to, say, their conduct, their ideals, the ways in which reason uniquely supports their views, the care with which they reason, the ways in which their religious perspective uniquely equips them to deal with significant areas of concern, or the like. Such views about one's own group promote solidarity and a sense of shared identity. But at least in the case of claims to be superior in the respects just mentioned, all of which have a this-worldly focus, there is some chance that the relevant claims can be assessed in the light of experience. We can review the conduct of the groups in question, both now and across their history, both when they have been relatively powerful and when they have been a relatively powerless and struggling minority. We can study and assess the care with which they reason about their beliefs, both at present and across their history.

Consequently, the claim that one's group does best in the relevant respect is one that can be assessed and runs the risk of being refuted by the historical record. When the issue is salvation, however, and insofar as salvation is thought of as something that occurs in an afterlife, there is no such possibility. Exclusivism about salvation involves moving the relevant matter concerning which claims to be special are being made beyond the possibility of this-worldly confirmation or disconfirmation, by removing it from this earthly life, while making the relevant expectation that is associated with our being special as grand as it can be.

Needless to say, I do not argue that there is no religious tradition that is correct in its claim that its members alone are special in this regard. For one thing, I believe myself to lack the requisite expertise to make such a declaration. Rather, my contention is that the belief that one's own group is special in this regard is a worry and is suspect. One has to ask whether each group is the best judge in its own case. One also has to ask whether such an interpretation of the situation of one's own group might not be somewhat self-serving. And the question arises whether such an assertion in the case of one's own religious group is not also somewhat unbecoming.

It might be objected that inclusivism or pluralism might just as readily be objects of suspicion—perhaps on the grounds that these positions may sometimes seem to have been endorsed for the sake of convenience or with a view to conforming to the spirit of the times. Yet the question seems especially salient in the case in which, so to speak, we alone win and everyone else loses. Likewise, one could ask whether someone who endorses ES1 but rejects ES2, and hence is an exclusivist about the means but not an exclusivist tout court, should also **(p.65)** worry about thinking herself special in a particular respect—namely, in just the respect that ES1 specifies. One simple thought here, however, is just that if thinking yourself to be somewhat special (in the fashion just suggested) is in any way problematic, thinking yourself to be *really* special (in the way of doing so that is involved in being an exclusivist about salvation, with the endorsement of both ES1 and ES2 that this consists in) is all the more so.

I do not suggest that people adopt exclusivism about salvation—or, for that matter, exclusivism in any broader sense or, indeed, their religious views in general—because it is to their advantage to do so. For one thing, an exclusivist about salvation may have given up a great deal to belong to her religion, so that overall a calculation of self-interest—at least, not a good one—is unlikely to explain her religious stance. Thus such a person may belong to a religion that is very demanding of its practitioners in a variety of ways, requiring great self-sacrifice. The exclusivistic beliefs in question may be part of a large system of beliefs whose adoption does not appear to issue, as a whole, from a calculation of what is to one's advantage, or at least not from a good calculation. And the typical believer may, as far as we can tell, have adopted the relevant exclusivistic beliefs for the respectable, everyday, familiar reason that this is what she has

been told to believe by those she trusts and has been brought up to trust. Furthermore, the exclusivistic views in question may even have been endorsed with regret and with reluctance and only after careful reflection and in the wake of having found those views inescapable in light of scriptures or the teachings of the tradition, or the like. And those who consider themselves favored in the relevant respect may think that they are the immensely fortunate beneficiaries of divine grace, may feel that they do not merit their good fortune, and may feel humbled by it. All of this may be so.

Yet in spite of all this, the belief under discussion may still deserve to be viewed with suspicion, both by those who hold it and by outsiders looking in. Life can be complicated in a host of ways, including this one. A demanding aspect to membership can itself serve to obscure and conceal a self-serving aspect. One way it can do so is make it seem that an anticipated reward would be deserved. Another is that the very demanding path that is involved may be taken to bespeak one's having a privileged status, one's being special, a status that, in turn, is given expression in exclusivistic beliefs. And as humble as they may be about it, exclusivists are still claiming an extremely privileged status for themselves and for their coreligionists. Again, I do not say that there is no group that is special in this respect. My point is only that the view that one belongs to such a group should be viewed with suspicion and embraced with caution and a second thought or two (or more). Probably, the worrying nature of all this is hard to see from the inside. After all, traditions have explanations that make a lot of sense from the inside. But the corresponding claims of members of other traditions will be more readily agreed to be appropriate objects of suspicion.

(p.66) By way of casting into clearer relief what is problematic about the particular way of thinking that one's own group is special that exclusivism involves, here is another possible way one might think that one's group is special. Imagine that there is a religious group whose path is a demanding one, which those who take it recognize it to be demanding. Imagine, too, that those who take this path understand there to be great benefits that are derivative from this demanding path but that the benefits of this process are understood to be bestowed (via some mechanism or other—perhaps a modified law of Karma, for example) on nonmembers. And the members of the generous tradition cheerfully endorse this self-sacrificial arrangement. Rewards for themselves are reluctantly accepted, if at all, but they are mainly concerned to benefit others, especially their brothers and sisters whose views they do not share. All one needs to do is to juxtapose the two proposed ways of seeing one's group as special. The point makes itself.

Or consider this. Imagine that we come across two remote peoples. Each has its religious traditions, its sacred texts, its revered leaders, its established practices, and so on. One says, though, that only its members will receive salvation. They face this fact with reluctance. It is sad and unfortunate, they say,

but there it is, and it is not up to them; all they can do is decide how to react in light of this fact. The other group holds that others can achieve salvation through its route—and this includes others with quite different views. All other things being equal, there is an extra question to be asked in the first case. Of course, if we encountered a hundred groups of the first sort, it may be that one of them would be getting things right and be accurate in thinking itself special in the relevant way. But that does not obviate the need to look with some suspicion at all such cases, whether one is an outsider looking in or an insider contemplating his own situation.

While I have identified what I take to be grounds for suspicion and an important area of concern, I am less sure when someone might reasonably judge that these grounds for suspicion have been laid to rest and the concern has been allayed. Actually, my inclination is to think of what is under discussion here as an abiding structural reason for wariness, one that can, however, be given adequate expression by accompanying the relevant beliefs with an element of suspicion, even while one holds them. This applies, in particular, to the belief that one's group is special in the relevant respect.

Second, there is, as William Rowe notes, “the practical difficulty that hundreds of thousands of people live and die in other religions and cultures without ever having heard of the path of salvation taught by a particular exclusivistic religion” (*Philosophy of Religion*, 164). Rowe's point, which, like the last point, concerns exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation in particular, is that it would be profoundly unfair for the contingent matter of when and where one lives to have such a significance. In making this last point, he is apparently **(p. 67)** assuming that something like the belief requirement is operative. Indeed, since he appears to assume that the fact that someone has lived and died “without having heard of the path of salvation taught by a particular exclusivistic religion” would—according to an exclusivistic religion—have the result that one would not achieve salvation, he may be endorsing a version of the belief requirement that is along the lines of ES4. Rowe does not say this, but perhaps he would also agree that any attempt to argue that these are *not* contingent matters but rather that the fact that some are well situated and others are poorly situated in this regard is a result of the operation of the will of God, the law of Karma, or some other such mechanism faces the obvious difficulty that the force, being, or mechanism responsible for such a fiasco would be morally unimpressive—a result that is inconsistent with central claims of the relevant religious traditions.¹² It would be unjust for people who follow faithfully and in good conscience the path that has been presented to them as the correct path—and, indeed, often has been presented as such by the people they trust most and have most reason to trust—to be excluded from salvation just because it turned out not to be the correct path. Looking at the matter from a monotheistic perspective, we can say that since this would be unjust, we can reasonably reject the idea that a deity would permit it. Any tradition that involves a deity who is

just and benevolent, as a worship-worthy being would be, would not permit such a state of affairs.

Third, and this point is also made by Rowe, in religious traditions other than one's own, "one finds saintly figures...individuals whose lives exhibit profound ethical commitment and religious devotion" (*Philosophy of Religion*, 165). The thought that such people are excluded from salvation by virtue of belonging to the wrong religion is dubious. In saying this, I am assuming that salvation is bestowed in accordance with desert and is not a consequence of happenstance.

Fourth—and here I move from considering objections to identifying a relevant area of inquiry—as mentioned, exclusivism about the beneficiaries of salvation is sometimes accompanied by, and sometimes in addition is underpinned by, the belief requirement. However, it is not clear that we have much control **(p.68)** over our relevant beliefs.¹³ If belief were not at all under our control, and if, in addition, our salvation were to depend on what we believe, then our salvation would, in turn—at least to the extent that it depended on what we believe—not be under our control either. The questions here include the following. What sort of control or influence over whether they achieve salvation is it reasonable to consider people to be able to exercise? And would the extent to which people are able to exercise control or influence over their beliefs suffice for this level of control? I will not pursue these matters here.

Fifth—and once again, this is less an objection and more an area of inquiry—here is a point that is relevant since it has a bearing on attempts to compare exclusivism about salvation with competing views. There are a number of considerations that lead people to endorse exclusivism about salvation. These include the following: the view that our group has greater insight into important matters of religious significance than does anyone else, the view that our group alone correctly understands precisely what is required for salvation, and the view that our group has something valuable and even priceless to which others should have access, and that is very worthy of protection and of transmission to others. Many religious people have strong feelings about such matters as these. However, many of these considerations, and the attendant feelings, may be given expression through what I will shortly introduce as inclusivism about salvation—or by some versions thereof, for there are many versions. The availability of these versions of inclusivism constitutes a difficulty for exclusivism insofar as they provide a way to give expression to much that fuels exclusivism but that is free of its most serious difficulties.

I do not say that the objections and concerns mentioned provide a decisive refutation of exclusivism about salvation. But we can see, at any rate, some of the objections and concerns that confront exclusivism about salvation.

Additional Interpretations of Exclusivism

The term *exclusivism* is sometimes used in a general way to refer to the combination of exclusivism about truth and exclusivism about salvation, where these are construed in one or another of the ways we have probed. Here, from a contemporary textbook in philosophy of religion, is an example of such a combination, all of the components of which we actually have already encountered, though never combined in this particular way: **(p.69)**

[According to exclusivism] salvation, liberation, human fulfillment, or whatever else one considers as the ultimate goal of the religion, is found solely in or through one particular religion. Although other religions contain truths, one religion is exclusively effective by alone providing the way of salvation or liberation. Adherents of other religions, although sincere in their piety and upright in their moral conduct, cannot attain salvation through their religions. To be saved, they must be told about and acknowledge the unique way.... [Exclusivists contend that religions] make incompatible truth claims. But incompatible truth claims cannot both be true. Hence, where they contradict, at least one claim must be false. This might be termed doctrinal exclusivism: the doctrines of one religion are mostly true while contradictory claims in other traditions are mostly false. (Michael Peterson et al., *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 270)

It seems that an exclusivist is understood here to be someone who endorses exclusivism about salvation, which is the combination of ES1 and ES2. And ES4, a more specific form of the belief requirement, seems to be expressed by the remark that in order to be saved, people “must be told about and acknowledge the unique way.” On the issue of truth, what is being proposed may amount to ET 9, though it may also be that, following the logic of chapter 2, what is proposed is best reconstructed as ET11 or perhaps ET12.

Here is another rendering. Exclusivism assumes the “uniqueness, superiority and finality” of one’s own tradition, according to James C. Livingston and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (*Modern Christian Thought, Vol. 2: The Twentieth Century*, 471). Each of these terms (*uniqueness, superiority, finality*) in turn requires explanation. One might, for example, propose such an explanation in terms of precisely the same combination that, I just suggested, may be present in the work of Peterson and colleagues. But there are other options.

Alan Race defines *exclusivism* in yet another way. He suggests that Christian exclusivism, which is the topic he especially wishes to pursue, is the view that “counts the revelation in Jesus Christ as the sole criterion by which all religions...can be understood and judged” (*Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 31). Obviously, a corresponding analysis can be provided by other religious traditions. This analysis is, however, also open to a number of interpretations. A

lot depends on the respects in which other religions are being judged. As salvifically effective? As true? As inspiring? And so on. I suspect that Race means that to the extent that other traditions disagree with Christianity, they are wrong—which is to comment on the issue of truth and, incidentally, is compatible with the other traditions being right about a great deal. Also, if “the revelation in Jesus Christ [is] the sole criterion by which all religions...can be understood and judged,” there is at least the possibility that **(p.70)** some of them will be judged quite favorably or even very favorably in some respects—for example, with respect to truth or with respect to salvation or in any one of numerous other ways. At any rate, this account of exclusivism does not explicitly state that all religions will be found wanting in all of the relevant respects.

As you would expect, there are uses of *exclusivism* whose focus is on something other than truth or salvation. E. P. Sanders writes of how Saint Paul's “exclusivism” made it difficult for many in Paul's early audiences to accept his message (*Paul* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 21). Sanders here alludes to Paul's insistence that Christian converts eschew participation in paganism. So exclusive participation in one religion is what is at issue here. Exclusivism, so construed, would be the view that this is required, desirable, preferable, or the like. Or it might be the view that those who participate in pagan practices should be shunned or excluded from the community.

The point is familiar and merits repetition. Exclusivism excludes. And there are many things from which someone may be excluded and hence many ways in which “being excluded” can be interpreted. It goes without saying that there is no single correct way to use the term *exclusivism*. But it is helpful to distinguish clearly the various options. What I am proposing, in this as in some other cases, is what seems to me to be the best way to slice the cake, but there are others. And which way we do so is not, in the end, the most important issue.

Finally, here is another point on the connection between truth and salvation. If, as I have suggested, exclusivism about salvation includes ES1, the view that only one's own tradition delivers salvation, it might be thought natural to characterize exclusivism about truth as the view that only one's own tradition makes true claims, which is just to say that here we have a reason to take exclusivism about truth to be just ET1, the very narrow view with which we began discussion of that topic. Needless to say, however, this appeal to symmetry should not be thought to be anything more than one of many relevant factors that need to be considered. I believe that it is, on balance, outweighed by the various reasons to adopt the more expansive reading of exclusivism about truth that was developed in chapter 2, according to which exclusivism about truth should be read to include what I have characterized as its more open forms. However, the appeal to symmetry might lead us to move in the opposite direction: to extend the more open analysis developed in the area of truth to the area of salvation. And the fact that—as I aver—exclusivism about salvation, as I

have characterized it, is a problematic position might also move us in this direction.¹⁴ We certainly could **(p.71)** come up with an open version of exclusivism about salvation if we set out to do so. This might be that we are far better off than others with respect to salvation—either with respect to the means, the beneficiaries, or both—but that others still do fairly well in such respects: their situation is not disastrous. In fact, I will revisit this issue at the very end of chapter 5.

Notes:

(1.) Incidentally, I am aware that, at a stretch, ES1 could be read as saying that membership in our tradition is required for salvation. Indeed, I have noticed that some people interpret ES1 in this way, especially on encountering it, and the associated issues, for the first time. That membership in our tradition is required for salvation, however, is what is expressed by ES2, and ES1 has no such implication.

(2.) As a foretaste of things to come in this regard, consider this remark from C. S. Lewis: “We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know him can be saved through Him” (*Mere Christianity* [San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001], 64). This may combine an acceptance of ES1 with a rejection of, or at any rate a failure to endorse, ES2.

(3.) A further complication here arises from the fact that, as mentioned, membership may actually be understood to require salvation. That is, being a member may be understood in a kingdom-not-of-this-world sort of way so that one is a member only if one has achieved salvation. In that case, while it would be true that

ES2 Only members of our tradition can achieve salvation,

this would be so in virtue of the fact that to be a member *is* to achieve salvation. (Thanks to Aaron Vaidan for some observations about these matters.)

(4.) Actually, this requires qualification. If there is a set of beliefs whose possession, as a whole, is understood by an exclusivist to be sufficient for salvation, that set may include some beliefs that are not uniquely held by members of that tradition in which alone salvation is understood by the exclusivist to be found. But there must be other beliefs within that set that are uniquely held by members of the tradition in question, so that the set as a whole is uniquely held by members of that tradition.

(5.) Here is a point to keep in mind while considering these matters. Someone who says that holding certain beliefs is necessary or sufficient for salvation may be assuming that if someone holds the beliefs in question, they will, as a matter of fact, also satisfy various other conditions. There are various possibilities: adhering to certain moral standards, submission to one or more relevant

authorities, participation in certain ceremonies or rituals or other observances, and so on. Or the assumption might be that only someone who is a direct recipient of divine grace of a certain sort would hold the relevant beliefs. The result is that discussion of holding the relevant beliefs and of the significance of doing so may serve as shorthand for discussion of a broader set of conditions. So when it is said that holding certain beliefs is either a necessary or sufficient condition of salvation, there may actually be a complex set of connections here to be unpacked.

(6.) It might be suggested that if universalism is true, then there would not be much point in observing that holding any particular belief—or, more broadly, satisfying any particular condition—is sufficient for salvation. (If all roads are believed to lead to Sligo, what is the point of asserting that *this* road leads to Sligo?) Still, particular ways to salvation might be more suitable for particular individuals for any number of reasons, such as psychological makeup, personal history, cultural context, or the like. (Even if all roads lead to Sligo, there might be reasons to point someone in the direction of a particular road, such as the fact that it fits better with her tastes, interests, proclivities, memories, and so forth.) Incidentally, the claim that belief is sufficient for salvation should not be taken to mean that salvation is produced by belief *per se*. Divine agency, or some corresponding mechanism, would presumably need to be combined with belief. The idea might be along these lines in the case of the theistic traditions: God bestows salvation in response to belief. The reading of “sufficient condition” that is involved here has two components. First, a sufficient condition of X's occurring is any condition such that if it obtains, it follows that X obtains. So there is an if-then element involved. If someone believes, then he will be, or is, saved. The second component is that a sufficient condition is somehow causally relevant to the occurrence of X or at the very least is the occasion thereof. So, for example, belief is thought by some to have a causal role of some sort in the occurrence of salvation. Belief can be sufficient in this sense—in the sense that involves these two components—even while it is not sufficient in another important sense. In this other sense, a sufficient condition of something amounts to everything that actually brings it about or is responsible for its existence or occurrence. If divine agency confers salvation—when there is belief of the right sort or when other conditions are met—then belief of the right sort (or whatever other conditions are relevant) is not sufficient in this other sense. So I am reading “sufficient condition” in the first of these ways. This reading may be a little unusual. More common, I think, is the notion of a sufficient condition as consisting solely in the if-then component, so that a sufficient condition of X's occurring is just any condition such that if it obtains, it follows that X obtains.

(7.) “Well into the middle ages and beyond...Christian doctrines about other religions were regularly invoked to clarify the point of its own central doctrines or to authorize vigorous and far-reaching missionary endeavors. The prominence of formulations asserting the supersession and fulfillment of other religions...

along with generally negative assessments of other religions and convictions about the difficulty of attaining salvation without explicit faith lent considerable urgency to the Christian missionary enterprise" (DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions*, 23).

(8.) See <http://hindunet.org/HPG.pdf>.

(9.) For some introductory discussion of this matter, in the course of which a number of perspectives receive examination, see the various essays in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2(2), 1998; www.sbts.edu/resources/category/journal-of-theology/sbjt-22-summer-1998/.

(10.) See n. 5.

(11.) For further investigation of these matters and an interpretation of Islam as fundamentally inclusivist on the matter of salvation, see Mohammad Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press).

(12.) Another question raised by Rowe's remarks is how we are to understand the notion of hearing about a certain path to salvation or, more broadly, hearing about the teachings of a religious tradition. There is the question of whether one's auditory capacities are working properly, the separate question of whether one has the cognitive capacity to understand what one has heard, and the separate question of whether one has actually understood what one has heard. These are all ways in which the notion of hearing might be interpreted. Further, there is the question whether the relevant beliefs are live options for someone who is encountering them. Obviously, there are plenty of worms in this can. For a start, someone who has "heard" certain teachings in all three senses identified but who finds what he has heard and understood to be ridiculous and implausible, so that it is not a live option for him, may be no more at fault for not believing what he has heard than someone who has not heard the teachings in question in any of these senses.

(13.) I reflect on this in chapter 3 of *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*. A full discussion of this topic would require asking whether there are relevant alternatives to belief, such as acceptance, that might be thought both to be sufficient for salvation and to be under our control. I will not broach this interesting topic here.

(14.) On the other hand, the following consideration tugs a little in the opposite direction. The fact that ET1, given the fact of shared content among the traditions, leads to inconsistency was an important reason to move in the direction of a more open notion of exclusivism about truth. But this particular factor is absent in the case of exclusivism about salvation.

