

# **Survey of Theology 9.**

**Christianity and Other  
World Religions**

# Introduction

**“... it is impossible today for any one religion to exist in splendid isolation and ignore the others. Today more than ever, Christianity too is brought into contact, discussion and confrontation with other religions. To the extension of the geographical horizon of religion at the beginning of modern times there has been added in our own time an enormous extension of the historical horizon.”**

- Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, p. 89

# Introduction

**In has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralist society – not merely a society which is in fact plural in a variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as a thing to be approved and cherished.**

- Lesslie Newbigin

*Two* senses of pluralism:

1. a fact of life
2. an *ideology*, a belief pluralism should be encouraged, that any claims to a *unique* truth are *imperialist* and *divisive*

# Three Christian Approaches to Other Religions

1. Particularism
2. Inclusivism
3. Pluralism

# Particularism

God has revealed *the* Way and *the* Truth and *the* Life in Jesus Christ, and wills this to be known throughout the world.

- Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965)

*Christian Message in  
a Non-Christian World*

The revelation of Christianity is in a category of its own. It is a unique, and distinctive faith. The “revelations” found in other religions are inauthentic, purely human inventions

Another term: **exclusivism**

# Particularism

Two camps of particularists:

1. there is no knowledge of God to be found outside of Christ (Karl Barth)
2. God's self-revelation may occur outside of Christianity, but can only be interpreted correctly in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ (Hendrik Kraemer)

# Particularism

## Criticism of Particularism:

- Inconsistent with the God's desire to save all human beings.
- What of those who have not heard the gospel, or choose to reject it?

# Particularism

Fulgentius of Ruspe, disciple of Augustine  
4<sup>th</sup> century:

**“The holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and proclaims that none of those who are outside of the Catholic Church – not only pagans, but Jews also, heretics and schismatics – can have part in eternal life, but will go into eternal fire, ‘which was prepared for the devil and his angels,’ unless they are gathered into that Church before the end of life.”**

# Particularism

*Barth:*

knowledge of God and salvation are

possible only through Christ

at the end of history, grace will triumph over

unbelief, and all will come to faith in

Christ

the particularity of God's revelation through

Christ is thus compatible with belief in

universal salvation

# Inclusivism

Most significant advocate: Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner. In volume 5 of *Theological Investigations*:

- 1. “Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all people, which cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right.”
- 2. revelation of God in Christ took place at a *specific time in history*. Those who lived before, or who have not yet heard of it, would seemed excluded from salvation. This is incompatible with God’s will to save all.

# Inclusivism

Karl Rahner. In volume 5 of *Theological Investigations*:

- 3. ***Knowledge of God***, and ***God's saving grace*** must therefore be available outside Christianity, including other religions, despite their errors and shortcomings
- 4. faithful adherents of non-Christians religions should be regarded as ***“anonymous Christians”***
  - “Somehow all people must be able to be members of the church.”
- 5. Religious pluralism will always be part of human existence

# Inclusivism

Rahner:

- Christianity and Christ have a *unique* and *exclusive* status that other religions do not share. Other religions are *not* equal but different ways of encountering God
- Nevertheless
  - *knowledge of God* (God's self-revelation) may be present in other religions
  - *the grace of God and even salvation* may be present in other religions
    - grace might be mediated by the lifestyle they evoke, e.g. selfless love

# Inclusivism

Rahner:

Consider the Old Testament, the outlook of a non-Christian religion, Judaism.

- We discard some practices we regard as unacceptable (e.g. dietary laws)
- We retain others as valid (e.g. moral laws)

We can do the same with other religions

# Inclusivism

Term “**anonymous Christians**” widely criticized:

- John Hick: paternalistic: “honorary status granted unilaterally to people who have not expressed any desire for it.”
- Hans Küng: “It would be impossible to find anywhere in the world a sincere Jew, Muslim or atheist who would not regard the assertion that he is an ‘anonymous Christian’ as presumptuous”

# Pluralism

Pluralism: each religion is a *distinctive* yet *equally valid* understanding of God or ultimate reality

Most significant advocate: John Hick (b. 1922)

- *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973)
- *The Second Christianity* (1983)

# Pluralism

**“...we need a Copernican revolution in our understanding of religion. The traditional dogma has been that Christianity is the centre of the universe of faiths, with all other religions seen as revolving at various removes around the revelation in Christ and being graded according to their nearness to or distance from it. But during the last hundred years or so we ... have realized that there is deep devotion to God, true sainthood, and deep spiritual life within these other religions; and so we have created our epicycles of theory, such as notions of anonymous Christianity and of implicit faith. But would it not be more realistic now to make the shift from Christianity at the centre to God at the centre, and to see both our own and the other great world religions as revolving around the same divine reality?”**

- John Hick

# Pluralism

Hick: we must distinguish between:

- the ultimate spiritual, transcendent reality underlying the various religious systems
- the perceptions of this reality within the various religions

Draws on Kant's distinction between:

- the “**thing in itself**” (never directly knowable)
- our *indirect* knowledge of things, always colored by our subjective experience and our limited ability to conceptualize

# Pluralism

Following Kant:

- We have no direct knowledge of “The Real”
- Religions are human responses to “The Real,” and are colored by the historical and social contexts in which the religions evolved

**This distinction enables us to acknowledge both the one unlimited transcendent divine Reality and also a plurality of varying human concepts, images, and experiences of response to that Reality.**

- John Hick

# Pluralism

What of the radical differences in beliefs and practices among the various religions?

Hick:

- the same spiritual reality lies at the heart of every religion, yet **“their differing experiences of that reality, interacting over the centuries with the different thought-forms of different cultures, have led to increasing differentiation and contrasting elaboration”**
- Differences should be regarded as “both-and” rather than “either-or”

# Pluralism

## Criticism of Pluralism:

- Some differences between the various religions cannot be reconciled in a “both-and” manner. They are clearly contradictory
- Sets aside a major Christian conviction: that Jesus Christ is a unique revelation of God. This point of view therefore cannot be considered a “Christian” perspective

# Concluding Comments

	Revelation of God in Jesus Christ unique, revealing most fully the true nature of God	God's self-revelation and grace are present outside of Christianity
Particularism	yes	no
Inclusivism	yes	yes
Pluralism	no	yes

# Concluding Comments

Hans Küng:

**Not only Christianity, but also the world religions are aware of man's *alienation, enslavement, need of redemption*: inasmuch, that is, as they know of man's loneliness, addiction, abandonment, lack of freedom, his abysmal fear, anxiety, his selfish ways and his masks; inasmuch as they are troubled about the unutterable suffering, the misery of this unredeemed world and the sense and nonsense of death; inasmuch as they therefore await something new and long for the transfiguration, rebirth, redemption and liberation of man and his world.**

# Concluding Comments

Not only Christianity, but also the world religions perceive *the goodness, mercy and graciousness* of the Divinity: inasmuch, that is, as they know that the Divinity, despite its closeness, is distant and hidden, that the Divinity itself must bestow closeness, presence and revealedness; inasmuch as they tell man that he may not approach the Divinity as a matter of course, confident in his own innocence, that he is in need of purification and reconciliation, that he needs sacrifice for the remission of sin, that he gains life only by passing through death; in fact, that in the last resort man cannot redeem and liberate himself, but is thrown back on God's all-embracing love.

# Concluding Comments

**Not only Christianity, but also the world religions rightly heed the *call of their prophets*: inasmuch, that is, as they receive from their great prophetic figures – models of knowledge and behavior – inspiration, courage and strength for a new start toward greater truth and deeper understanding, for a breakthrough toward revival and renewal of the traditional religion.**

# References

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Chapter 17 in: **Christian Theology. An Introduction. Third Edition**, Alister E. McGrath, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2001
- “The Challenge of the World Religions”  
Part III in: **On Being a Christian**, Hans Küng, Doubleday, Garden City, NY, 1976